

The Girl in the Tinder App

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“To all the readers and bookstagrammers who breathe life into these pages.”

“To my mentor, who guided me through the labyrinth of words.”

“And last but not the least, the child within us who still believes in fairy tales.”



Prologue

Solving mysteries often involves focusing on the smaller details rather than the grander scheme of things. In fact, the bigger picture can sometimes lead us astray with distractions. So, I believe it's best to start this way.

Mysteries, at their core, are like intricate puzzles waiting to be deciphered. They often hide their answers within the minutiae, the subtle clues that may escape casual observation. It's akin to examining the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle; it's the individual fragments that ultimately form the complete picture. In our pursuit of unraveling mysteries, we must hone our attention to the finer points, as they hold the key to understanding the enigma that lies before us.

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Chapter 1

The sound of the train filled the air, breaking my train of thought as I stood, gripping the nearest pole tightly.

I was on my way back from a rather casual day at work. Despite the fact that I earned a high income and didn't have strict deadlines, my work primarily involved remote tasks, so I led a low-key lifestyle that seamlessly blended with the lower-middle-class. The most ironic aspect was my bank account balance, which told a completely different story. Few individuals truly understood the life I led. My wife, Hridya, my friend and co-worker, Anand, and my mother-in-law, Kalika, were among the select few. Kalika didn't particularly like me, and in my mind, I often referred to her as "Kali," the Hindu goddess associated with time, doomsday, and death.

On that day, I decided to take the metro train.

The train had already passed six stops, and I was still standing there with tired legs and restless hands, battling a spiritual migraine. My worn-out shoes, far past their prime, were tightly squeezing my toes, and a local man had advised against getting a new pair.

It was the first time in Dubai that I had seen a train packed to the brim. I counted a hundred and ten people seated and fifty-six standing. It felt like a blast from the past, reminiscent of my hometown, where the number of people always exceeded the available amenities. As I clung to the pole, I exchanged smiles with anyone who met my gaze.

Things went on smoothly until a glass of fine wine, a blend of purple hibiscus and the essence of a burgundy sunset, suddenly crashed to the floor. Her nearby onlookers, and perhaps a group of potential suitors, were left bewildered. Everything turned red, like ripe tomatoes, in an instant.

Curiously, it appeared that I was the only one genuinely concerned, though I kept it concealed within, wary of becoming the solitary hero and avoiding the attention I was sure to attract. Other commuters, though clearly bewildered, were preoccupied with managing their distress, let alone tending to someone else's. Their actions were a prime example of the practical meaning of "minding your own business."

About two minutes into the commotion, those closest to the collapsed lady, her devoted onlookers, managed to procure some water for her. Even in her semi-conscious state, she managed to consume about a tenth of a liter, as my watchful eyes informed me.

Most assumed she had either fainted or succumbed to a sudden malaise. The next station, Business Bay, was a mere six minutes away, and the train couldn't make an unscheduled stop. Panic spread as the emergency alarm blared, hearts raced, and thoughts raced even faster, albeit from the minds of weary passengers.

Amidst all the frenzy, I felt a bead of sweat trickling down my cheek. Wiping it away, I instantly discerned the root cause of the lady's distress. With a scorching temperature of 43°C, a malfunctioning air conditioning system in the cabin, and the lady's ill-advised choice of heavy clothing, ignoring the day's weather forecast, it became evident that Dubai was as hot as the lady herself, who urgently needed a plunge into a pool of ice-cold water.

Looking back, Dubai's heat was more intense than usual, making it no surprise that people chose to take the train, even for relatively

short distances, unlike my own considerably lengthy commute.

The commotion subsided, and as the lady regained consciousness and stood up, one of her former suitors offered her a seat, standing guard as if the other passengers were to blame for her dehydration. I couldn't help but smile at the thought and reminisce about the daring feats I had undertaken to win the affection of certain girls. I recalled an incident from my college days when I escorted a girl home with an umbrella in torrential rain, only to return home soaked and battered.

It was one of those crazy things that made you question your sanity. Love, as I thought back, was an unpredictable force with no regard for one's well-being. I smiled at the memory but also remembered catching a severe case of pneumonia the following day. Those were the times I looked back on with a mix of fondness and disbelief, especially when the same girl eventually left me for a guy who drove a Maruti Swift car.

I could still recite the license plate number of that despised car: "KL 7 8055," I muttered, clutching the train's pole.

Over time, I came to dislike the young man but eventually matured enough to stop letting it bother me. I realized she deserved her happiness, and I deserved my peace of mind. To put it briefly, that saga could fill a chapter. This same man, unknowingly my rival, played a significant role in my journey toward a passion for technology. After getting to know him better (following 'our' girl leaving me for another man, this time one living in Dubai), I discovered that my supposed nemesis wasn't such a bad guy, and we both had been victims of the same circumstances.

I came back to reality, doing away with the afterthoughts that came with the incident that had transpired. It was my stop.

I stepped out of the train, descended the escalator at the downtown Metro Station, and emerged into the vast expanse

of Dubai's elevated streets. The sun's relentless intensity made me flinch, prompting me to raise my hand to shield my eyes from its searing glare. Clutching my modest briefcase, which held nothing more than a pen and some crumpled pieces of paper, I longed for the comfort of my home and the solace of my favorite show. Glancing at my watch, it indicated that there were seventeen minutes left until two o'clock.

The streets of Dubai stretched before me, a labyrinth of towering skyscrapers casting long shadows under the unforgiving sun. The scorching pavement seemed to shimmer in the heat, and the city's relentless energy pulsed through the air. Pedestrians hurried past, each seemingly absorbed in their world, while the distant hum of traffic filled the background. I navigated through the mob with a sense of purpose, eager to find respite from the sweltering heat.

I exhaled and paced even faster. If I had a better way of transporting myself to my house, I would. It was at this stage in life one would wish dearly for a teleporting machine. But I was always known to be a more realistic person. I knew I still had a good number of steps to cover before I reached home, so I began to jog, not minding my environment. When I knew jogging would not take me there in record time, I bolted.

At the age of thirty-three, I still had a strong stride in my step. I navigated through the bustling crowd with rapid, purposeful strides. Occasionally, I accidentally bumped into people, promptly offering a brief "sorry" as I deftly maneuvered my way through the throng. This agility, however, came at the cost of perspiration. I had considered this in advance and calculated that if I reached home as planned, I'd have just enough time for a quick shower. I'd throw on a single pair of shorts, forgoing the briefs due to time constraints, and a simple black T-shirt. My favorite one bore the iconic Levi's logo.

I raced against time, and just as I was about to bolt through the gate of the villa, I stayed in. I momentarily stopped and looked to my left.

There, an elderly woman, gray in hair, wrinkled in face, and sweet as a potion, called out to me.

“Rahul, my boy! You don’t want shawarma today? It’s your special with smoked paprika and extra Tahini sauce.”

It was tempting, I knew. I had given it some thought early in the morning when I walked out. I had even told her to keep it fresh and hot for me. Plus, it was not a bad idea to watch Netflix murders unfold while eating homemade pita bread from a woman who I regarded as a mother, because my actual mom was in India, running the family business of spices and antique materials.

I turned towards her cafeteria; it was a small wooden shed that was roofed with zinc. I bent and walked in because I was taller than the entrance of the shop.

“Rahul,” she walked out from the inside of her kitchen and raised her hand to rub my hair, which I always kept low.

I loved the gesture as I bent my head for her to allow her to rub my hair.

“You know, I thought I had missed you, or that you might stay out longer than usual because you rarely go out,” she remarked, shaking her head as she spoke.

“Well, you’re right about that,” I replied. “I did get caught up in the allure of the outside world, forgetting that it’s normal for people to venture out occasionally. But truth be told, I don’t go out that often.”

She looked at me curiously and continued, “I can’t help but wonder how you manage to support yourself, your wife, your child, and your mother-in-law.”

I explained, “Well, for one, my child has a scholarship, and the occasional odd job I pick up when I do go out helps cover some expenses. Plus, my brother, who lives in Canada, sends financial support, so I don’t have to worry about putting food on the table.”

“Ah! I see”

“Yes, Mama. But can you give me the sandwich? I must get home now; my daughter must have arrived and...” I was still talking when she interrupted.

“Of course! I’m sorry about that. I made sure to make everything to your taste because you are a very special customer to me, and in fact, you are the good and regular one.”

I rubbed my toes inside my shoe feverishly as I tried to keep cool. The elderly lady, who went by the name Mrs. Aya, was a talker. So, I noticed every other person who constantly shook their heads and smiled while talking. They always had things to say, and they always had time on their side. Something I didn’t have.

The moment Mrs. Aya brought my sandwich, I collected it, placed the equivalent amount of currency needed to purchase the edible in her hands, and zoomed off. Much to the surprise of Mrs. Aya, who was dumbfounded.

I ran straight to my house. When I scanned the compound mindlessly, I could tell my wife’s car was parked to the side. I glanced at my wristwatch and checked the time. I had only three minutes remaining.

Swiftly, I swung open the front door and dashed into the living room. There, I found my wife, Hridya, already settled in front of the fifty-five-inch Samsung TV with its sleek black frame.

Hridya was a woman of grace and elegance, with long, flowing dark hair that cascaded down her shoulders like a waterfall. Her warm brown eyes radiated kindness and intelligence, and her

smile was as captivating as it was comforting. She had an air of quiet confidence about her, and her presence always filled the room with a sense of calm. She was dressed in pajamas this time, partly waiting for me.

“You! Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“With or without you, the show goes on, pretty boy,” my wife teased.

“Where is Diya?”

“She’s upstairs, and you are sweating like you just ran a marathon.”

“I know! Let me shower a bit and come down. You kept the notepads?”

“Of course, I did.”

“Good.”

I fled up the stairs and was on my way to my room when I heard the tiniest of sobs, my attention split within that instant.

I stopped in my tracks and proceeded to the place where the noise came from.

To cause less noise, I took off my shoes and opted to walk barefoot in the direction of the sobs. It was coming from my daughter’s room. The door was shut, but since it was not soundproof like mine and my wife’s room, for obvious reasons, I could hear half of the conversations that transpired.

“Your father has spoiled you enough, and I will personally make you right.”

I could hear the harsh cautions coming from the room as I placed my ear on the door and listened with rapt attention.

I waited for the right moment to barge in, and the right moment came when I heard more muffled screams. My heart raced as I did.

I pushed the door open and went face-to-face with something I had never imagined I would see.

It sent shock waves through my spine and into my brain. I could not comprehend how to handle the situation, then reciprocate the act, in my head. I was slow to anger, calculative, and an imposer of words.

My mother-in-law, Kali, was twisting the ear of my little girl, and there was no atom of regret on her face while she did it. The whole time, she planned to do more than that. Even after I had seen what she did, she kept her fingers on Diya's earlobes.

My little girl was visibly shaken. She murmured and sobbed. I stared at her and wondered how long that had been going on under my roof and supervision and it hurt me instantly.

"Let her go, now," I screamed.

"And why should I do that? Huh?"

"I don't have to know; just let her go."

"After all she did?" Kali opposed.

"You are not the one paying the bills on her head," I had already seen enough at that point. I walked up to them and smacked away Kali's hand from my daughter's. "I said let her go."

"You are the one spoiling her. Let her get all she wants and do whatever she wants."

"Like I said, you don't pay her bills. You have no right to do what you just did. If you were not my wife's mother, I would have called the police on you, and I'm not even joking."

"Now you want to call the police on me?"

We kept on the exchange of words in the room and rambled while I held my daughter and patted her back, with her head on my shoulder.

Hridya, my wife, had heard the noise that came from upstairs, and judging from the fact that I had not come down yet for the show I loved so much, something had most definitely happened.

She walked up quickly and went ahead to Diya's room. She opened the door, which was already unlocked by four inches, and was greeted by the sight of her mother and her husband in a heavy battle, throwing words at each other. It was the same old problem, and now, she was getting fed up.

"What is it this time with the both of you?"

"I caught your mother twisting the ears of our little girl. I see that as inappropriate, and the consent of an actual parent must have to be obtained first. Even then, she has no right to do what she did. The redness on her ears shows how much pull and strain she must have received. A three-year-old is delicate enough to experience such an amount of pain."

"Mom, I've told you before, you don't beat up a child here. This isn't our old times. We have different ways of scolding a child. I've already told you this before."

I watched in horror as my wife continued to speak. I cut her off when I had heard vaguely enough.

"By what you said, it is easy to note that this was not the first time this happened. And you have been keeping it away from me? Why would you keep this away from me? How come I'm just hearing about this now?" I asked, turning to her.

"How would you know about it when all you do is sit in front of the television each day, doing nothing? You claim you have a job, but your hands don't get dirty. I said this the first day I came to

this house—that you were not man enough for my daughter.”

“Is that so?”

“Of course, how can a man not have any idea of what goes on in his house?”

I looked at my wife, then at Kali. My facial muscles had contracted, and my eyes were striking the very essence of anger.

“I did know that something out of the ordinary was happening in this house. I just decided to turn a blind eye to it. Do you think I am unaware of the calls you give my wife at night when it seems I am sleeping? Oh, I was always awake because I knew the time you called. One hour after my bedtime.

I would face the other way in our duvet and fake snore away while the conversation between you and my wife transpired. Ill conversations of words I cannot say now due to the presence of my daughter I took all this in because I respect you. But it seems you have decided to take another step past your boundaries and trust me when I say I would put you in your place.”

While I talked, Kali was dumbfounded and taken aback, as only her gaped mouth and wide eyes could tell how much surprise she had taken in.

“You see the kind of husband you keep? Talking back at your mother while you watch. This gives me every ounce to believe that he has rubbed fully on you. I never trained you to act like this. Never!” Kali attacked.

“Rahul, stop! That is my mother, you are speaking to her that way,” Hridya finally cried out. She was at a crossroads and found it hard to pick. All seemed to be the right cause, but there was pressure to choose who to stand for. Husband or mother?

I immediately retorted back, “You don’t tell me to shut up when you know who is at fault here. Let me start from the onset. You

were pregnant with Diya, and she,” I pointed at Kali, “decided to come stay with you till you delivered. It was understandable then because you were a nursing mother and needed the guidance of a person who had undergone the surrogate stage. If I am not mistaken, after birth, she continued to stay. I allowed that. And from the corner of my eyes, she began fishing for her belongings at the house, and she occupied the guestroom.

A year later, what seemed like a normal visit became a permanent stay. Even when there is nothing wrong with that, I believe I have a mother who would also want to come to stay with her son and feel her granddaughter every day, but no, she is at her husband’s house! I have no idea why you, Kali, have decided to stay here and run my own house for me.

I believe it’s best you go back to your husband and let your daughter and I treat our home as we see fit. I mean, we were doing just great before you showed up. And I know, if not for your husband, I would never have gotten to be with Hridya in the first place. Because you never liked me.

“Spare me that. At least you know I would never let you get married to my daughter. You do not take religion seriously; you can imagine that for the first year I came, there was no shrine in this house. That would have gone on if I never placed one there, to cleanse the house and drive away foul spirits.”

I slammed my hand against my forehead. “You are still as archaic as my old textbook from my kindergarten days. Times have changed; the world is becoming more logical and digital, and your worries are some imaginary spirits who have possibly become digital too.”

“What is the meaning of archaic, Hridya?” Kali asked her daughter.

Hridya's shoulder slumped and her head fell, burying her eyes to the ground as she replied, "It means extremely old, or as primitive as man," my wife said.

Kali turned to me with defiant eyes and said, "You dare to call me old school?" She charged at me without giving me a thought, still holding Diya.

Hridya jumped in the way and stopped the coming chaos from happening.

"You are still as rash as ever, and I would not condone this in my house. The safety of my daughter and wife is my priority. Such behavior, I see as a threat to my household."

"It isn't a threat to us," Hridya objected and faced me.

"Hridya?"

"Yes. I know my mother can be defiant most times, but she only wants what is best for us. I don't see why you don't see that. We have talked about this. I, her, along with Aunt Roshni, who comes around, have been telling them that they will grow to understand that all is for the best. I wanted to give you time. But I stand with my mother on this one."

"And here I decided to play the good person by theorizing that all was well when Aunt Roshni came around. Believing theories without proving the facts about them is something I would never dabble with on your side again. I have given you a lot of luxury. You handle our marital affairs and discuss them with someone whose last name we don't know. I feel disgusted, Hridya. The trust I have in you has dwindled," I explained, letting out my disgust.

I turned around and opened the door behind me. I walked out, still with Diya, who was still sobbing and whose eyes were wide open on my shoulder. I slammed the door behind me, leaving

my wife and mother-in-law in the room, and walked downstairs. I opened the front door and went outside. At the doorstep, I dropped Diya to the ground and wiped the sticky tears that had dried up on her cheeks.

“Hey honey, I’m sorry you had to see and hear all that. Do you want ice cream? Let’s go get some, okay?”

She nodded, and hand in hand, father and daughter walked through the lane towards the gate of the estate.

Hridya

I stood by the glass window and watched as they walked away.

“I think it’s time we act. You can always get half of his property and live a comfortable life with your daughter. If this goes on, you might lose me and her.”

Teardrops streamed down my cheeks, and I shut my eyes tightly. As quick as it fell, I wiped it away. I inhaled, then exhaled, and turned away, pushing the curtain that blocked me away.

As I walked past, my mother tried to hold me by the shoulder, but I didn’t oblige. “Not now, mother; I’m doing this because of you.”

I ran upstairs, and in a couple of seconds, the door could be heard being opened, then slammed hard against its hold.

Kali, who had watched me go, smiled and walked casually to the television that had been on, showing the show I and Rahul had planned to watch. She shifted away from the notepad and pen and switched it to a religious channel. She smiled, relaxed, and watched. She turned and noticed the food parcel was still covered. She opened it, and the steam from the plate rose.

She inhaled it and let out a delighted beam. She took out a single slice and ate at it while she crossed her legs on the table right in front of her.

Her plan was all set. And she knew Rahul was not the type to fall on his knees to beg. That was why she was certain she would win it this time. All she needed was patience.

She looked at the house like it was her first time. She must have pictured having the house to herself. She chuckled and took in the delightful image her brain had relayed to her.

My daughter and I had toured the neighborhood around their estate. I wanted her mind to be completely off what had happened before indulging her in some ice cream delicacy. We had dabbled over childish things like why A came before B and how she was born.

I used the stereotypical “The almighty put you in your mummy’s tummy and brought you out when he saw you were ready.”

Although young Diya was not satisfied with the answer because she seemed to have the same traits as her father, being an extremely curious person, I found a way of taking her off-topic.

“Look there, ice cream,” I pointed.

“Blue Berry Strawberry!” Little Diya cried in excitement.

“Yes, baby girl.”

As we walked towards the large building that was made in a brick-style form, brown in color, with shades of black and white at favorable points, which added to its unique beauty, we came across my best friend and work colleague, Anand. We have known each other since the days of MIT at the same company we work for.

“Rahul, my friend!” Anand waved at us.

Anand was happy to see me. It had been a long time, and we only conversed with texts. Not regularly, however, but good enough to know that a strong bond was evident between us.

“Anand, how are you?” I replied as I shifted my daughter from my right hand to my left so I could give a proper handshake to my friend.

“I am doing extremely well. You know, the sun has somehow refused to set. It’s extremely hot, so I decided to have a cup of ice cream in this environment. Tell me, how have you been?”

“I have been doing well. I also came to get some ice cream for me and my daughter.”

“That is good.” I bent and rubbed my hand along Diya’s dark and silky hair. “How are you?”

“I’m not fine. Dada quarreled with Mama and Grandma.

“Ah, it was nothing.” I tried to cut her off, but she was already faster than her father.

Anand had already gotten the heads-up.

“Another quarrel just in the space of three days. If I didn’t know less, I would say all is well, but to be blunt, it seems the love has begun to hit a hard rock.”

“It hasn’t hit a hard rock, Anand,” I replied, as we walked towards the door of the eatery. “I just feel like my mother-in-law has some plans already set. Plans that I am sure of, but surprised, my wife has also decided to be a part of it.”

“That means she would choose her mother before you, her husband.”

“Thank you” I greeted the security guard who stood by the door and opened it before going back to my conversation with Anand. “What I’m saying is that I’ve also lost some trust. She and her mother are up to certain things. Going out on possible dates with some colleagues, or maybe it’s my imagination. Colleagues who I know her mother is trying to set up as a potential husband.

“And you would just let it slide?”

We sat down in a designated corner.

“I mean, I would not say I have been—” I stopped myself and looked at my daughter. “Honey, go get any ice cream of your choice for you, me, and your uncle, okay?”

“Anyone of my choice?” She beamed.

“Yes, anyone”

She jumped down from the chair and ran towards the counter. The show glass was taller than her, but the attendant was doing his very best to converse with her.

Seeing she had gone out of ear reach, I continued, “Like I said, I have not been at my best. My affair with our secretary during Sumodh’s bachelor’s party was mostly because I was drunk. How that got to her, I have no idea. I then chose to be an observer of these things going on in my house. My wife is understandable, but she is being fed evil thoughts like a baby by her mother. I presume sooner or later, something that would shake the marriage would come. My intuition tells me so, and it never lies.”

“So, do you have a plan B?” my friend asked.

“I do, always. I have already written a list of comebacks if it does lead to a...”

“Not that.” He whispered in a low voice, cutting me off before continuing in a low tone, “I mean, if she already has people she is seeing, why don’t you have one who would also be a backup if things go haywire?”

I sat and reasoned about what I had been told. I looked over at my daughter, who was jumping at the counter. She had gotten her cup and was licking at it while conversing playfully with the attendant. I turned my eyes to Anand, who sat down and leaned against his chair, waiting for my reply.

Anand has changed, I thought. I began to see his physical features even more. His hair was still as dark as ever, but he now had a massive side beard, which complimented his light skin. From his skin, I could extrapolate that he had not been coming out directly against the sun for a while. He also wore, as I had noticed, some crocs. It felt like it was meant to complement his outfit, but with the almost discreet scent that was covered over his customary Louis Vuitton men's perfume. And he always, most times unconsciously, looked at his watch and outside the window. I could only be sure.

"You're coming from the hospital, yes?"

Anand was dumbstruck. "How did you know that?"

"Well, I knew I had perceived the hospital smell of iodine. And the legs you put on. It shows you have been there for a while. And I know you are not a doctor or a nurse, and you have a rather strong immune system because you only fell ill twice in the past three years. Do not be surprised; I observe a lot. So, who is at the hospital? A new catch?" I teased.

"No. No," Anand relaxed, but his face had retracted to a sad look. He drummed his fingertips on the table as Diya came with two cups of ice cream. She placed one each for both of us.

"You can have mine, honey," I told Diya, "And you can go along and play in the kid zone."

Diya did not wait to be told the second time; she jumped down from the seat and ran to join other kids who played around the zone.

I turned to face Anand after she had run off. "And you seem pale too. Not from sickness, but from stress and overthinking.

"Ah, scrap that. My mother has been battling cancer of the lungs, and it has worsened. Keeping her alive has sucked up my bills.

When I'm not at work, I sit right beside her. It has been traumatic, Rahul. I sat and watched her struggle to breathe for a couple of minutes without being able to do anything about it.

"I understand a little. But—"

"Oh, don't worry, I have a plan all set out to help her go through it. Right now, it's about you.

Anand was a selfless man. He would put everyone before himself and drive to the end, just to make sure the person got everything right. This applied to the people he was dear to and loved.

"I have a solution for you. It isn't much of a hassle; I use it too. You have most likely heard of Tinder, yes?"

"Of course, but I'm not as familiar with it."

"That is not a worry; let me show you how to go about it. It would connect you to people, mostly females, who share the same interests as you. When that happens and it matches, you slide right, and the job is done. You get a sweetheart."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. From anywhere in the world."

"That sounds interesting, although I might not put too much effort into it."

Anand smiled. "I said that too. Let me help you set it up. Hand over your phone."

I handed my phone to Anand. It has cracked a bit on its screen.

"You should change this soon," Anand said, turning the phone around and looking at it from every possible direction. It was an iPhone X. One that I could afford many times if I pleased.

"Still good enough," he said, going ahead to download the app from the Apple Store.

“So, tell me, what are your hobbies?”

“Err, sleeping, eating,” I said.

Anand raised his eyes from the phone screen and looked at me. “Anything worth knowing about you?”

“I enjoy solving mysteries, and I am a master analyzer by my measurement. I love reading and watching mystery and cold cases. It intrigues me a lot. I could spend my happy days binge-watching it till I lose my sanity.”

“Anything else?”

“Well, I love traveling and tasting new things. I love thrills and adventure, and as you know, I love tech.”

“Okay. All I need now is a picture of you.”

Anand stood up and took about two steps back.

“Smile,” he pointed at the camera, and I awkwardly posed for the camera.

The phone clicked, and Anand looked at the picture. “Perfect”

“That’s all?”

“Of course, here you go. Your very own Tinder profile.”

I stared at the app on my phone.

“It looks pink, like something a woman would love, not meant to be stereotypical.”

“Exactly, that is why you would find as many women as possible there.”

“More fish in the sea?”

“More fish in the sea, my good friend.”

We both laughed as I scrolled through potential matches. I then pressed the power button and slipped the phone into my pocket.

“Ah, it’s about time I went back to the hospital,” Anand said as he looked at his watch. “Hope you’re still safeguarding the price?”

“Of course. No one would ever get that close to it, not even my wife.”

“Tested and trusted.”

Both men laughed again. “I would be taking this with me,” Anand pointed at the still-dead ice cream.

“Sure”

“And for husband’s sake and peace, do get some ice cream home to your wife and your rival.”

“That I had in mind,” I nodded.

I watched as Anand opened the door. I watched him walk to the curb of the road and hail a taxi. After he had zoomed away, I stood up, went to the counter, and paid for the ice cream we had taken. I requested two large cups for takeout. One is chocolate-flavored, for my wife, and the other is vanilla, for my mother-in-law. I also picked a pack of pizza to go with it.

After that had been settled, I got my daughter, and we hailed a cab to our estate.

On our way back, Diya fell asleep on my side, and I cupped her affectionately.

The cab went through the gate as I directed it to the front yard of my house. There, I highlighted. My right hand used to hold a sleeping Diya to my shoulder; my left hand used to hold the ice cream and pizza after the cab driver assisted me in placing them on my free hand.

I walked up, past my courtyard of greener pastures, and up the tiled stairs of four flights, onto the welcome home rug.

I instinctively kicked at the door, and it went open.

“No lock? It seems they were expecting me.”

I smiled at the thought. Maybe, just maybe, things were going to go right.

As I walked inside, I felt a rather sad but tense air. I could decipher that something was not right somewhere. I went through the short corridor, where I placed my slipper to the side, and walked into the living room.

There, I was greeted by the sight of my mother-in-law and wife, seated together on the sofa. When my wife noticed me, her countenance fell. She saw me with her daughter resting on my shoulder, and she could not bear to look away. She must have wanted to gather enough courage for what was to come.

“Hey baby, I got something for you guys,” I placed the pizza on the table, then the ice cream. I noticed some documents on the table but paid less attention to them.

“Here, your favorite ice cream flavor, and some pepperoni pizza too, just for both of you to while away time.”

I got no reply from both women.

I became more suspicious.

Then, I looked at the documents on the table. I needed no one to tell me what it was.

“Is that what I think it is?” I looked at my wife.

Hridya raised her head, sniffled, and tried to keep her already red eyes steady. “It is, Rahul; I want a divorce.”

⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮



Chapter 2

Nothing seemed right any longer for me after I confirmed that document on the table that evening. I and my wife never slept together on the same bed after that incident.

I would spend my nights sitting and rolling on the sofa in the living room.

“How could she?” I had said this to myself countless times.

I would sit at the dining table on most nights and stare at the documents that already had my wife’s signature on them, written in ink. All that was awaiting was my signature.

This got so deep to me that I began having PTSD with papers. At work, a bunch of files would be handed to me, and all I could see were the divorce papers. I would blank out for more than thirty seconds before gaining my composure and going about my work.

I would make sure the security was not tampered with, and I would also make sure to fix any bugs and improve the firewall that was kept in the company’s database. All this I did, but my mind was nowhere to be found along the streets of reality.

I had tried many ways to get her to change her mind. I had even tried to be diplomatic but to no avail. She was adamant. It seemed like she had already moved on.

I knew that the only person who could change her daughter’s mind was her mother. I tried to be as good as she was, but she was also adamant and took my good works as a charity on my side.

I was clearly disturbed and distressed.

The first and only person I told was Anand.

“I’m telling you; I have no idea what to do.”

“Well, a divorce; that was very sudden.”

“I knew it would come sooner or later than expected if the situation continued, but... I just have no idea. And she’s insistent on me signing the divorce papers.”

“What would you do?” He asked.

“Well, I have no choice. I can’t keep an unhappy person in my house, and I just want to do away with her mother. She is like a thorn dug deep in my palm, very irritable.”

“My friend, do what you have to do. I believe that something good will find you today.”

That was what Anand consoled me with as he opted to take me out.

I took that in good faith, and truly, on that day after I had gone home, taken my bath, and prepared a meal for myself, something that changed my life happened.

As I, in my shorts, sat down in front of my television and watched the cold case, I turned on my phone, and some notifications poured in. It was some matches from Tinder. I had in mind to ignore them and focus on my case as I tried to solve them alongside the narrator when another message popped in.

It was a peculiar one that piqued my interest. Sent by one Maya Dominquez, who had matched my profile.

I at once tapped on the message.

The message consisted of dots and dashes.

I stared intently at it, then, with a beaming smile, dropped my phone on the table and zoomed upstairs into my bedroom.

My wife was stark naked when I barged inside.

“Where are my pen and notepad?”

“I have no idea, and why don’t you think about privacy?”

“You’re still my wife, and I’ve seen you naked a million times; that shouldn’t be a problem, should it?”

She blushed for a second before pointing at her side of the drawer. “It’s there, and please, next time, knock.”

“It’s my house; I won’t,” I smirked and rummaged through the drawer.

“Good, good.” I found them and turned to run out of the room again.

“What is making you so excited?” She inquired.

“Oh, something out of the ordinary. You need not worry, though. It seems you are going out,” I gestured to the gown on the bed. “Do have fun.”

That was not what Hridya wanted to hear, but she took it anyway. She folded her hands across her ample breast, which stood large and round due to her already-given birth. She still had a good body for someone who had experienced the gift of labor. She had not grown out of place or outstretched skin, and her body was more than able to adapt to a growing baby.

“Sure, I would have fun.”

But I never wanted to hear it. I skipped the flight of stairs and ran across to my phone.

I sat on the table and shed some light on it from the lamp.

“Okay. Okay, let’s see”!

Carefully, I drew a graphical diagram of the Latin Morse code for alphabets and numbers. Each letter, corresponding to each dot and dash, needed to be determined.

I smiled as I did it. Finally, something fun to do—something to take my mind off a depressing route.

I pictured myself as my best fictional character, Sherlock Holmes. I presumed I was a detective in my living room, trying to solve a case that only I would know the answer to.

After I had drawn out my table to assist me, I cross-checked it on the internet to be sure. I was, in fact, and I stood up and gave myself a casual bow.

“Truly, all these years of walking in the way of the mystery are not in vain,” I smiled to myself.

“What are you doing?” Hridya, who was dressed beautifully in the elegant gown she had worn, stood at the side of the living room and watched.

“I know you have been standing there; I’m sorry I did not pay proper attention to you; I was busy writing down something. By the way, you look gorgeous; go out there, keep your face high, and kill the show.” I threw a salute with two fingers. I noticed she was no longer wearing her wedding ring. That almost threw me off my mental balance, but I composed myself with a beaming smile.

She had become agitated by my new attitude and rolled her eyes. “But he was meant to be sad. Or has he finally given in?” She must have thought as she walked out.

After I heard the door slam shut and the car outside zoom off, I turned back to my phone and picked it up.

“So...”

I looked at the message, which was sent as follows:

.... . -.. -.. ---

I hummed, as I traced the dots and dashes, and within ten seconds, I had gotten it.

“Hello!” I cried out, “Such genius.”

I picked up my phone and sent:

.... .. / - -.. .

Which could be transcribed as, in Morse code, “Hi there”?

The lady’s icon dropped down almost as suddenly when I sent my text.

She sent some laughing emojis, followed by a “You understood that? It means you are a man of your word.”

I laughed and replied, “Well, I must commend you because you started the conversation peculiarly, and that piqued my interest.”

“So, what took you so long to reply?” She asked and placed a smirk emoji in front of the text.

“Well, I had to quickly write down a graphic aid of the Morse code so I could use it to help me translate.”

“Wow, you did that just now?”

“Of course. I don’t mean to brag, though.”

“Show me!”

I took a picture of it and sent it straight to her.

She viewed it and reacted with a heart emoji. “This is awesome! I love it. I’m still learning, so I only know the basics, but this would help me extremely well.”

“I hope you also know how they sound.”

“The basics? Yes. Well, I’m also still getting accustomed to the basics, because it’s the alphabet, and I’m still getting lag in some areas.”

“I see, I see.”

“So, your name is Rahul Vinod?”

“Of course, and I’m sure your name is Maya Dominquez.”

“Absolutely. And where are you texting from?”

“Down Town, Dubai. I’m guessing you’re not on this continent.”

“I’m from Mexico. Chihuahua Mexico. Deep in the ghettos of Ciudad Juarez.”

“You’re on the other side of the world, I see.”

“Yes, and I figured we matched and wanted something new and outside my world.”

“I do love how enthusiastic you are. You are vibrant as a young honeybee.”

“I am young; you can also call me honey, and I’m as hyperactive as the bee.”

“How young are you?”

“Guess,” she said with a smirk.

“Errr,30?”

“Hell no, I should be in my home of marriage.”

“Okay, 28?”

“I should have toured the whole world by that time.”

“What? Then how old are you?”

“I’m 26,” she sent a smiling emoticon.

“Damn.”

“I know, I know, but trust me when I say I’m smart. I’m the smartest person in my whole ghetto.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I love mysteries a lot. I’ve read every Sherlock Holmes book and every Robert Langdon series.”

“Really?” I asked with enthusiasm.

“Yes.”

“Okay, let’s see. Tell me how Holmes was able to figure out the mystery behind the first murder in *A Study of Scarlet*.”

“Well, through the act of careful analysis and deduction, The first point I would make is When Holmes went to the site with Dr. Watson, he noticed the marks of a four-wheeled cab, while others at the crime scene were hampering around to see the dead body, correct?”

“Correct,” I smiled at myself.

I teased.

“I guess so. And the way he caught Jefferson, it was the most spontaneous and unexpected catch. I never saw it coming. Sherlock Holmes is a god!”

“Absolutely! I prefer him to any fictional detective. Although I have tried to train myself to think and be as precise as Sherlock Holmes, I don’t think reality can mix with fiction.”

“That’s particularly true. But, when a situation rises to stand ground, I bet you, you might have to be a Sherlock.”

“Until then, I guess we can only hope it doesn’t come because I would be tensed as hell.”

“Maybe, just maybe. So, tell me more about yourself.”

For the first time since we began texting, my hands froze. I looked at the stairs and thought about my wife and family.

Besides, what's the worst that could happen? She stays on the other side of the world; it's not like I would get a plane ticket to go see her. I don't even know what she looks like.

I stared at her profile picture. It was an animated character. A feminine one with red hair and dark skin. The character looked extremely pretty.

As I admired it, my hands began to type.

"Well, about me, I'm a tech genius, and I use that to my advantage to make money—good money, actually—not to brag because that is the least shit on my list. I am maybe a married man."

"Maybe a married man?"

"Well, actually, my wife wants a divorce, and right now, I have no choice but to give in."

"Oh, I'm sorry about that."

"Nah, it's fine, trust me. She has already moved on, and I think it's time I did too. I have a daughter, though, Diya. She's still a child, but she's growing fast."

"Can I see a picture of her?"

"Sure"

I sent an attachment.

"OMG! She's so cute. I love her eyes too, grey. It's beautiful."

"I know, I know, she got it from her mother."

"Your wife must be beautiful too. Sure, she is."

I hesitated a bit but finally gave in. "Can I see a picture of you or two, Maya?"

“Well, I do not have a phone good enough to take pictures, but I do have two pictures on my phone I could send to you.”

“Sure, I would be happy enough to look at them.”

She sent two attachments, and I could only beam in excitement as I stared at the pictures.

I gave out a laugh that made no sound and rubbed my hair furiously with my hand. I was completely awestruck by the beauty I had seen.

Truly the most beautiful are yet to be born, but this one here is the epitome of a goddess. A crazy goddess.

Her hair was purple. Her skin was as tan as the beach sun. Her lips were pink, and her big black eyes and pointed nose complimented her face. Her freckles were the icing on the cake, while her septum piercing was the top-notch “Baddie vibe,” as Gen Z would call it, that she omitted. In that picture, was a selfie, and the sunshine rested gently on her skin.

The other picture was of her wearing glasses as she smiled away, showing her teeth. She had long black hair, as opposed to the previous picture. Her hair almost covered a part of her face.

“In the second picture, the wind was blowing extremely hard, I presume, and you were at a place of high altitude. On a date too, with a friend who is a guy. And, to your left, is your friend who made you go on the date because she wanted to talk to the guy who is standing with her. They photobombed the picture. I mean, you can see her smiling hard because she wanted to be here. You, however, are becoming comfortable. I love your smile.”

“Wow, you could figure that out by just looking at a picture. And you claim you are not a Sherlock?” She added a smirk emoji.

“Well, it was easy. Situations like this always happen.”

“Well, that’s true...”

And so, we continued to text and share stories about great cases solved through the history of time.

I would find myself rolling on the floor with my phone in my hand. Anywhere I went, I would always be on the phone to reply to Maya. My Tinder needed no other person except Maya.

We might have texted the equivalent of three chapters of a book. It was fun. It was fun enough that I did not give full attention to my wife when I returned.

Hridya came home furious after a possible failed date. All the while, she could only think of me and have me go in and out of her. Coming home to see me engrossed in my phone and not paying any little attention to her got her mad, but she knew she could not show it.

“Lock the door before going upstairs,” was what I called out to her.

Still agitated, she stormed to the door and bolted it, then stomped on the stairs, kicking her heels away. She stopped by Diya’s room and checked up on her before going to the master’s room, which she and I shared.

She peeled off her dress and went under the shower. There, she burst into tears and held her face in her arms.

That night, I didn’t think she would agree to have me around her so, I stayed back, completely engrossed and distracted by my newfound friend.

I stayed up all night, texting my newfound friend.

This went on for several weeks; during that time, we bonded even closer, and I shared a lot of my sensitive talks.

During work, all I could think of was going back home and waiting for 7:00 p.m. to text her. I could not concentrate; any

little time I had on my hands, I would go back to those two pictures and stare at them.

“Was she even fake?” I had questioned myself until I finally concluded that she wasn’t fake. The only thing I could not decipher was if she ever matched the picture. If that was the case, I was going to do anything in my power to get her; I did not care what stood in my way.

Text Maya!

That was all I wanted to do. The divorce meant nothing. I had found someone I could fall back on.

Maya had been extremely supportive. She was the antidote to the poison that slowly ate away at my life. She had picked up my puppet tag and revived me.

In Maya, I was a new creature.

It went on until the day we had a steamy session of online sex, or sexting, as Generation Z would call it. Although there was no exchange of sexually explicit pictures, the atmosphere I experienced was different from usual. Do not get me wrong, Hridya and I had one of the best sex lives and adventures one could only wish for, but there was just something about Maya that could not stop me, the nobleman.

To be more graphic, the sext was situated in my living room, dead at night. One thing had led to another; from the usual detective stories and discussions of topics of historical importance, the plus eighteen tones subtly sneaked in, and we began to speak in the most vulgar yet brain-soothing words.

Whipping each other with fantasies that each would have loved to play on the other if we were based in the same vicinity, I realized that Maya was submissive but would readily agree to switch roles. She loved calling me Babes because she was my

little dirty secret, and only I held the key to the pathway between her legs.

She would spread them at my call and keep them spread till I wished she closed it. She always wanted to be treated like the naughty girl she was.

I had beaten my meat to each reply. I needed, by a superior margin, to be under the duvet with this young and beautiful Latina princess, making the bed quake as well as her legs. I found myself minimizing my chats and surfing through incognito safari on Pornhub, looking for the best Latina amateur videos that best portrayed Maya.

After sifting through a couple of pages, I found one and went to work on my meat. It felt a bit dry at first, with my hands not having any lubricant, but when I remembered that besides my television, sweet scented oil was always kept, I stood up with my hard-on, dipped two fingers in, cupped it twice, then slipped it out. I then fell back on the sofa and grazed my oil-filled fingers underneath my foreskin. My erection jerked at the slight touch as I closed my eyes and imagined what was meant to be.

After I had oiled myself up with my free hand, I kept my phone slant and watched the porno as I began to stroke slowly, then gained more momentum with time as the intensity of the porno elevated.

All I could picture in my head was a beautiful picture of Maya. I wanted her so badly that I felt bad for my wife, whom I still genuinely loved, but at that time, the only thing I wanted to do was shoot my load out.

As I stroked my manhood, photoshopped images of Maya in various positions, brought to life by my brain, came to life. With the sounds of the porn blasting in my ears, I shot my load across, and it hit the rug beside me.

I was sweating and breathing profusely. With every second that passed, I tried to catch my breath, and with every second that passed, reality dawned on me. I might never see Maya, and I had just masturbated. I sat down naked on the sofa with my limp and shrinking erection that still had tiny drops of cum stuck on its tip and began to think about how dysfunctional my life was turning. I had a wife who stayed in the same house with me, but I still had to self-pleasure myself.

This was definitely what they called the post-nut clarity.

If I had heard that from someone about another person, I would term it ‘bullshit’ and laugh away hysterically because things like that were not meant to happen. But there I was the sole king of those accusations, with a clown crown on my head.

“It’s a shame. I mean, how would you live without me? Now, I feel pity for you,” Hridya said. She was present during my masturbation session, although I did not know what caused me to give in to the act.

“I think I would do just fine,” I replied.

She turned around the moment I looked in her direction. She was in see-through nightwear, and her jelly buttocks jiggled as she walked up the stairs.

Her breast had slipped out of the nightwear, and her nipples pointed as straight as the rivals of the LGBTQ community.

“It’s sad; you were just not as understanding.”

I looked at her as she walked up slowly. She bent when she had almost reached the top, causing her nightwear to rise and expose her butt cheeks and a glistening crack.

I smiled and stood up, supposedly hypnotized by what I had seen.

This made Hridya smile as she hurriedly stepped up and fled into our room, leaving the door about four inches open behind her.

I licked my lips as I was climbing up the stairs. As I reached the top of the stairs, I noticed that the door was slightly open. I smiled and walked towards it. In my hands, I had a pen, which I clicked with each step I took to create tension.

As I pushed the door open, I was greeted by the spread legs of Hridya. She was welcoming me into her warm chambers. She craved me like a child craving their favorite toy.

As she saw me enter, she bit her lips and smiled.

I stood at the door and watched her. I sized her up and weighed my options.

I shut the door behind me calmly and walked up to her slowly. My erection is beginning to kick in again. Bloodshot rapidly towards my member, rising to its full glory.

As I reached the side of the bed, I reached for her thighs, grabbed them, and pulled her to the edge of the bed. She let out a soft moan and bit her lips, and she kept eye contact with me.

I spread her legs again and ran my fingers through her crack, up her stomach, past her cleavage, leaving trails of juice in her mouth.

Hridya sucked at my mouth. She reached for my hard-on, but I bucked away. I pushed her to the bed and walked away from her.

She was confused by my reaction. She watched me walk from her towards my drawer.

“You know, there is something called post-nut clarity. I believe that since you told me about this divorce, I have not particularly ejaculated. I had been troubling myself with what I did wrong.

It didn't let me think straight. But in those five minutes when I sat to think about my life, I figured that yeah, of course, I can do without you and your pesky mother. The only person I can confidently stay with and bring her up with is my daughter. I guess she is the only person I need."

I took out the divorce papers from the drawer and sat down on the black fur-covered chair on the other side of the room. I clicked open the pen I had been holding and read through the terms and conditions.

"I see it was just the money. I love you a lot, Hridya. I even tried to be diplomatic with you. But if you stood with your mother, then instead of me, I can't say that would change anytime soon.

Hridya was dumbstruck. She could only watch. A once-wet crack dried up instantly after she realized where all this was leading.

The pen went down on the papers and scribbled on them the authentic signature of myself, Rahul Vinod.

"There you go, your divorce."

.....



Chapter 3

Hridya

I fumed. The tiny and near-invisible hairs on my hand stood tall as I boiled with anger. I watched him walk out of the door and slam it behind me. Still fully unclad, I walked up ferociously towards the papers on the table.

Written in ink was none other than the signature of my husband, as Rahul had accepted to part ways with me.

I stared long at the papers in disbelief. I had been hoping he would stay adamant for as long as he could.

It broke me.

I tossed the papers on the table and turned around. Streams of tears crept through and leaked out of my eyes. They rolled down my cheeks like the first phase of a river.

I turned to the wall and slammed it with my fist. This I did for a count of three times, accompanied by grunts before I spilled to the ground. There, I forced myself into a ball and cried silently until I fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke up with dark and hollow eyes. A duvet was covering me, and I looked pale as I stared at the tall mirror that was glued to the wall beside me. I stood up from the position where I had slept. As I tried to walk a few steps, I staggered and found Anchorage on the table next to me.

There on the table, my eyes met the papers. My mind was fully wrapped around the reality I was in and the incident that had

happened during the early hours of the morning. I looked at the time; it was five minutes past the 10 o'clock mark.

“Argh! School, Diya.” I rushed to the bathroom but stopped in my tracks as I remembered it was Saturday.

I entered the bathroom casually. I perceived something I was familiar with and something I knew I would miss. The scent of Rahul's soap

Rahul had used the bathroom earlier.

As I took in the scent, I turned on the shower and sat under it. The water washed away the sticky sweat on my skin and a little of the sadness that had overwhelmed me. I had no choice but to move on, just as Rahul had done.

I looked over at his bar of soap. I smiled and stretched my hands toward it. With one swipe, I collected it and used it on my skin.

Just one more time, I thought as I soaped myself and relished in the scent.

A handful of minutes later, I came out with my head and shoulders high and a towel wrapped around me. I was more energetic than before.

I sat on my bed and took out my cream, which I carefully applied to my skin, starting from my legs to my hands. Then, I applied a different lotion to my face.

After I had applied every area on my skin, I put on my fancy home clothes, opened the window to let the sun touch down, took out my phone, and snapped a series of pictures.

After sitting and selecting a few, I went ahead and posted them on social media with the caption, Independent woman. And, like a parasite always finding its way back, Rahul was the first person to react to it, just a few seconds after I had posted it with the caption “What year?”

I smiled at the visible joke but went ahead to just react to the comment without responding.

After I had done that, I picked up the papers and went to meet my mother, who still dozed away under her duvet. I opened the window, and the intensity of the sun made Kali squint.

“The sun is too much, Hridya; close the curtains.”

“He signed the papers, Amma.”

She sprang up to a sitting position on the bed with her eyes wide open. She looked directly at her daughter with a wry smile.

“What did you say, my dear child?”

I flung the papers towards my mother and fell to the nearby cushioned sofa.

Kali grabbed the paper the moment it touched the bed covers and, at once, read it thoroughly, not missing a single part. Then, her eyes came into contact with Rahul’s signature, and she beamed with a smile.

Then she turned to me, her daughter, who was deep in thought on the chair.

“I know what you are thinking, but trust me, this is the best decision you have made since you decided to tell the almighty that you chose me as a mother.” She proceeded to laugh at her joke.

“And who would be taking custody of the child?”

“He would.”

“He what?” Kali slammed her hand on the duvet.

“He would. I think it’s best he does it because she will always remind me of him.”

“And she stays with her father and grows up to be as lazy as him. A good woman rules her own house. She makes sure the house is in order. If she stayed with her father, she would not be able to do any of these. And who would they blame? Her mother. So, she better stay with us so she can learn all these things early. You don’t spoil a girl child.”

“But Mama, Rahul can take care of the house too. I’m sure he has that covered. Besides, the world is changing, and the girl child can become far greater.”

“Are you listening to yourself, Hridya? What better trophy does a good man have than a good wife? He would never be an option. It seems Rahul has eaten deep into you like cankerworms.”

“It’s not like that, Amma.”

“I haven’t even said the part that another woman would come in to play mother to your child. I’m telling you, the myth of wicked stepmothers is real. No woman would want to take care of a daughter she never gave birth to. Think, Hridya, think. You have to take custody of the child; you will thank me later for this advice I have given you.”

I thought to myself as I sat on the bed.

“Where is Rahul?”

“How would I know? You met me on the bed,” my mother replied. There was a little silence before she looked up at me. But really, where is Rahul?

Rahul

I was living the life. I knew that with a day’s court work, I would be a free man once again. I looked at my right-pointing fingers. There was no ring on it. For the first time in seven years, I will be going back to the default single setting.

Last night, I texted Maya about the divorce I signed. I said I was now a free man and just needed several legal signatures for it to be certified. I told her not to feel guilty about what had happened earlier and assured her it was okay to continue. I also thanked her for the action. According to me, it was all I needed to be exact in making the right decision.

I walked across the street and waved at anybody I could see, not minding if they returned my greetings or not. Deep down, I still felt hurt, but the happiness had overshadowed the pricking pain inside me.

I had texted Anand to meet me at a cafe, where we could sit and talk for a few minutes. That was where I was headed.

It was a mini-restaurant/breakfast spot for the morning cruise. I had left home very early. I had walked inside my room and saw Hridya curled up like a ball. With much pity, I had taken the duvet and placed it on top of her, so the cold would not creep in further than it was supposed to. I stared at her as she slept away and prayed to the Almighty that I did not make the wrong decision.

I then proceeded to take a hot shower, then wore some casual clothes, and went out of the room. The first place I went was my daughter's room. She was still asleep on her bed when I went ahead and sat by the side of her bed. I stroked her hair and planted a forehead kiss before adjusting the blanket on her body. I then proceeded to exit the room.

I jogged down the stairs and branched into the kitchen. There, I made some quick egg and bread toast and drank a glass of milk to accompany the meal. After I had done that, I grabbed my phone, which I had plugged near the sofa. I now called my bedroom and exited the house.

At the allocated destination, I sat down and ordered a hot mug of cappuccino as I waited for Anand.

A text pinged in, and it was from Maya.

“Hey sunshine, how are you?”

“I’m good. I got out of bed not too long ago and found myself in a cafe, sipping tea.”

“That’s great. So, how is home?”

“Home is... quiet.”

“No hard feelings?”

“No, no, none. We are as good as it can be.”

“That’s alright. When are you going to get the legal papers done for the divorce, though? Sorry if I’m prying too much.”

“Oh no, you are not. I can always confide in you because you have been a massive support. I would know more about the date when I get home.”

“Okay, baby.”

At that moment, Anand walked in.

“I have to go now; I’ll text you later, okay?”

“Okay, Babes, I love you.”

That text made me question my sight. I looked more at the screen before typing “I love you too” and slipping the phone into my pocket.

“Hey Anand!” I shook my friend, who sat down. “You look different today and smell different too. Like the normal you. You’ve been at home most of the time, I guess.”

“Yes, actually,” Anand slouched on his chair. He took out his phone and typed, then slipped it back into his leather jacket. “The hospital told me to take the week off, even when I do not work there. I almost became a staff,” he chuckled. “They assured

me my mother would be fine, and I needed not to worry. So, here I am. Started yesterday. What have you been up to?"

"Well," I beamed, "I met a girl on Tinder. I'm sorry I didn't tell you this earlier."

"It's good, my friend; I have no hard feelings. You are all smiling, and I'm happy about that. Tell me about this girl you met. What's her name? Where does she stay? When will we get to see her?"

"Calm down, my good friend," I laughed.

My cup of cappuccino was served, and I asked Anand to take whatever he wanted.

"A cup of coffee, please. Make it strong."

The waiter gave a nod and walked away.

"So, back to what we were saying, tell me!" Anand cried eagerly.

"Okay, her name is Maya."

"Oh, that's a really nice name."

"Yes. And she's a Latina. A pretty one, although I've seen just two pictures of her."

Anand paused and looked intently at me. "Just two pictures, and it got you all giddy like that?"

"Well, you would not understand."

"What if she's a fake person? What if?"

"She's not. I know that."

"A video call?"

"No, her phone doesn't support that."

"Oh my God! That could be another Uche from Nigeria trying to scam you. Has this person asked for money yet?"

“No, and I’m quick to deduce a scam account.”

“Really now? They are also smart, you know.”

“I know that. It’s just... Come on! I’m smart too. I would have noticed.”

“Alright, alright. Where does she stay?”

“Mexico, brother. Sadly, a great person like that stays so far.”

“It happens, Amigo; it happens.”

“And I finally signed the divorce papers.”

“You did?” Anand asked.

“Of course, I did.”

“That took some great thinking. And who would Diya stay with?”

“Me, of course. I don’t want her anywhere close to Kali.”

“The deceptive grandmother”

“Of course! She is cunning, and I don’t like it when one is that cunning.”

“When would you guys be going to court and finalizing it?”

“Well, I will know that when I reach home.”

“Ah, I see, I see.”

“So, tell me, Anand, how have you been faring, aside from your mother and the hospital?”

Anand raised his body and leaned into the table.

“So, I met this girl...”

We talked a bunch before we parted ways, around 2 PM.

I went home after that.

After about thirty minutes of walking, I reached the front of my home.

I knocked twice before I entered, and then I proceeded to put off my shoe at the corner before I went into the living room. There, I collapsed on a sofa, turned on the television, and played something different: sports. As I relaxed myself, Hridya walked down the stairs. I could discern she was the one because I knew how loud her footsteps sounded.

She walked towards me, and when she reached me, she stood right in front of me and crossed her arms.

“Could you please excuse me? You’re blocking the television, please.”

“I want custody of the child,” she replied.

I looked at her and burst into laughter. “Honestly, you look cute, sweetheart, and you being a comedian is something I did not think about. But not now; I’m trying to catch a game, so please, could you excuse me?”

She was adamant. She stood her ground without flinching. “I said I want custody for Diya.”

“Wait, are you being serious right now?”

There was silence in the room.

“I already told you, Addy, that signing the papers meant I would take custody of her,” I said calmly. “There is no need to beat around the bush. I’m keeping our daughter.”

“No, you’re not,” a voice said from the stairs.

Kali walked down in her majestic red and yellow saree.

“You seem to be going out; the door is on your left.”

“Before I do that, you should make sure you accept her terms. We can’t keep having you be a burden to us.”

“You are the burden. For four years, we stayed together, and nothing out of the ordinary happened. The moment you stepped in, a once peaceful home became the very carnage hell released in the last days. I do not want to dabble with any of you. My daughter stays with me, and that’s final,” I argued.

“Then we shall take it to court. After the legalization of the papers, we would have to stand in court, and you would have to give your reasons why you think Diya should be with you.”

I looked at Hridya and asked, “How can you stand by and watch your mother break our home?”

“I’m sorry, Rahul, but she has the final say here. Let us not drag it to court, please. Just allow Diya to stay with us, please.”

“Do not render yourself pitiful to him. I taught you to be a strong woman,” Kali said.

“If that is your wish, Kali, then we shall meet in court.”

“Next Monday, we would have to meet in court. Get your lawyer ready. I was already prepared for this and made the necessary arrangements because I knew you were going to be as strong as you usually are.”

I looked between mother and daughter, then picked up my phone and breezed past both women as I went up. Behind me, I heard Kali walk out and slam the door behind her.

I marched into my room and fell on the bed. It took me in, and the cozy feeling of the duvet welcomed me with open arms. I had forgotten what a bed felt like after I had made myself sleep on the sofa for more than two weeks.

I turned on my phone, and a message from Maya came in.

It was the reply from earlier, which I had no time to see.

It read, “Okay, baby.”

Then, I typed, “Court meeting is the week after the next, on Monday. I have to get a lawyer fast because custody of my daughter seems to have caused a dispute. I never wanted my daughter to experience this, but I have been pushed to the wall, and not fighting back would cause me to look like a weakling.”

I looked at the message again and wondered if it was worth sending. “Fuck it,” I concluded, and I clicked on the send button.

Immediately, her chat head dropped down.

Oh, she’s on, I thought.

“That’s sad. I’m sorry. I feel like I bring bad luck anywhere I go.

“Oh, it’s not your fault. My mother-in-law is to blame. She has turned my life upside down.”

“Funny you would say that,” Maya text read.

“Self-deprecation is key to avoiding depression.”

“You’re right. Take good care of yourself. I love you.”

“Bye baby, I love you too.”

I kept my phone away because, without Maya on it, it seemed useless. Before I did that, I stared at her pictures, which had become a tradition for me. I kissed my screen for a more dramatic effect. My body shuddered at the cringe I felt after I did that, but it was soothing to my soul.

I then went over to my laptop, which had been kept near the window, on a cushioned stool. I shifted another to it, covering two layers of curtain linen to reduce the sun’s intensity. I then went on to turn on my laptop and cross-check every important detail I had concerning my work and the safe that I was responsible for.

I cross-checked the pass key because only I knew the questions that were to be asked and the answers to these questions in

sequence. There were five questions, and no one has ever gotten past the first one, no matter how much of a hacker the person was.

I marveled at my wit, as no one had even come close to breaching it. After I was satisfied with my check, I shut my laptop down, sent a report to the chief via phone and email, and then went to bed.

The time was past 8 p.m. I woke up with a nasty headache. I was topless, as during my sleep, due to the intensity of the sun, I was out of reflex and, with a tiny part of myself awake to remember, took off my shirt. I stretched and allowed a few grunts to escape my mouth. Simultaneously, I looked to the side and was greeted by the sleeping position of my wife, who was also asleep on the bed, with Diya right beside her.

“A perfect family,” I thought. I stroked Diya’s hair and then Hridya’s.

I looked to my left at the clock that sat underneath the lamp and saw the time.

“Shit! Shit, Shit, Shit!” I exclaimed and jumped off the bed like a cat. This caused some turbulence on the bed as both females rolled on it. They came to a still position, with Diya throwing her leg on top of her mother, while Hridya enveloped her daughter with her arms.

I went ahead to sneak out a pillow from the bed and grabbed my phone. Then I slipped out of the room and ran straight for the stairs. As I swept past, I could hear the audible snores of my mother-in-law. I snorted and skipped down the stairs.

I was late for the normal texting time for me and Maya. I knew she would be annoyed and was ready to give a long text of words and emojis if that would help pacify her heart.

I joined the two long sofas together to form a bed and jumped in. The pillow I placed behind me as I lay comfortably and turned on my mobile data

Four texts from Maya came in, as I had expected, but it wasn't what I had pictured. They came in at different intervals.

It read, accordingly, as:

"Hey Baby! Where are you? I need to talk to you about something; it's urgent."

"Baby! Please, come online, please."

"Argh! I hope you're not ignoring me. I can only tell you this if you're online."

And the last one, which was five minutes ago, was, "I've been trying to reach you; I'm in a nasty situation, baby. Please, I need you now."

As I read through, I unconsciously sat up. My face furrowed, my eyes narrowed, and my lips parted by a visible two inches. I was worried already.

My hands typed faster than my brain.

"I'm here now, baby."

"*Now"

"What is Wrung?"

"*Wrong"

I took deep breaths to calm myself down, but I could feel a certain heat buildup in my body on that cold night.

"I'm online now; reply to me; let me see how I can help you out."

I waited for five minutes but received no text from Maya.

"Maya, are you there? Please talk to me."

I waited another five minutes.

“You’re getting me worried, Maya; I hope nothing is wrong with you. Please talk to me.”

Still, no reply came up.

“Fuck!” I bopped my clenched fist onto the sofa as I typed more, awaiting her reply.

This went on till midnight until I decided to stop for my sanity.

I swiped my chat down and saw that three times I swiped; it was just my message that was with a last text that read:

“I will be waiting for your reply, baby.”

I went on to drop an offline message for Anand.

“Hey bro, could you help me get a good lawyer? A very good one, irrespective of his amount. The court meeting is the next Monday after this one, and they have also thrown in the aspect of taking custody of Diya. I don’t want that to happen, man. You know I don’t want that. They could take anything they want—half of my property, I don’t care, but not my girl. So please, get me a lawyer and tell me when we can have a meeting so we can be prepared for the case. Thank you, my friend.”

I sent the text and plugged my phone in.

After that, I laid back on my makeshift bed, and with my hand underneath my head on the pillow, I stared up at the ceiling and tried to think about what could have happened to her.

My best guess was something related to crime because, after all, she stayed in one of the most dangerous cities in Mexico.

But Maya doesn’t seem like that kind of person, I thought. But then, one cannot possibly believe a theory except proven a fact.

I stayed fixed in that position as I continued to think. There I was until I stayed until I dozed off to sleep.

I woke up the next morning after being put out of sleep by the visual disturbance of high light that had penetrated the room through the windows that had been open. I flinched as my eyes adjusted to the light. I used my hand to trace my phone without having to look, and I grabbed it.

The time was past 10 a.m.

At least a message could have come up. I sat up and turned on the mobile data.

A wave of notifications flew through. After I had cleared some that held little or no importance, I realized that Maya had not texted back. This worried me, as I texted a single “hey” before proceeding to check Anand’s text on WhatsApp.

“Okay, brother, I’m sorry things have escalated to this level. But I have someone who would sort it out for us. I have a very good lawyer friend. I have texted him, and I am waiting for his reply. Good morning.”

That was as far back as 7 AM.

As I was about to reply, another text came in.

“He says he’s ready to work with you, and you should not worry about charges; he doesn’t request much. He would love to meet you on Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday before the coming Monday, which is the day of the case. Is that okay with you, brother?”

“Of course, it is,” I replied quickly.

“Okay, here is his number...” Anand sent the lawyer’s number to me. “You can reach out to him there.”

“Thank you, brother; you are a lifesaver.”

“It’s no biggie. How about your Latina girl, Maya?”

“Well, she is good. We texted, and everything is going perfectly.”

“Okay, brother, catch you later. I’m still enjoying my days off, you see.”

“Okay, bro, have fun.”

I dropped my phone, separated the sofas, and went upstairs to bathe and change.

When I came down, I met Hridya and Diya having some mother-daughter bonding time. I smiled and went to the kitchen. I saw some oats on the table with milk.

I smirked and grabbed it, then joined them in the living room to watch in silence.

My week ran fast. I met the lawyer, Mr. Siddharth. We had agreed to have a fair fight during the case, even after Mr. Siddharth had asked for any dirty linen hidden under the covers that I might have of my wife, which would be beneficial to the case.

I had made the lawyer swear he would not use it against her, except the opposition struck their nerves first, as I only wanted my daughter and nothing more. I did not want to ignite a fight that would leave hatred and bad blood among my main family.

As all this went on and the days counted, a text from Maya had not yet arrived. This caused me to be completely sad as I headed into a pivotal time in my life. Maya’s support was all I could ask for at that time.

Right until the day of the case, when I was dressed in a three-piece suit, I had received no text from Maya. I had given up hope after losing what I felt was a sprouting fairytale love. But alas, fairytales never transcended the mortal path of reality.

I looked at myself in the mirror, all dressed in a black suit. I looked good. With a comb, I scooped my hair and pampered it to a beautiful curve. I smiled at myself and went out. My wife had already taken the car with my mother-in-law and Diya.

I ordered a ride and arrived ten minutes before my case was called up. There, I met my lawyer, who was also prepared.

"I have written the case and sent all necessary documents to the judge. Your divorce has been given a green light; all we await now is the custody of the child."

I nodded and sat down. I looked to my right and saw Hridya, who held Diya, and Kali alongside the opposite lawyer. Kali was talking aggressively to the lawyer.

"You know, they already have a head-start point."

"What do you mean?" Mr. Siddharth asked.

"Well, look who Diya is with, her mom," I pointed.

At that moment, Diya saw me and waved frantically.

"She still loves you as much. I think she wants you," Mr. Siddharth said as I watched on.

"She's just too innocent to be dragged into something like that. I hate her grandmother for this."

"And I would help vindicate her from that. Just trust me. I do hope you have given me everything I need."

"Yes, yes, I have."

I looked in their direction and came face-to-face with Hridya. We kept eye contact before she looked away.

"I'm sorry, Hridya."

The case that was being settled, which delayed us, was finished. A mob of people marched out of the courtroom. In a few minutes, the clergy came forward and told us it was our turn. He then bowed and returned to the courtroom.

In a jiffy, we were lined up in the courtroom.

Each party sat beside the other, with the witness box right in the middle of the room. It was made possible so the witness would be directly in front of the judge while the case commenced.

“Court!” The clergy cried out as the judge came through the inner chambers. He was a hunky man and looked extremely intimidating with the glasses he had on.

He was the chief judge of the magistrate and chose to handle the case personally. He wore his judge outfit majestically and worked his way to his seat as the congregation stood, awaiting him.

The moment he took his seat, the clergy cried out again, “Court!” to signal everyone to sit.

And so, the case began.

The low chattering and small talks came to a minimal, if not an abrupt stop, obviously not from the whole audience, but most definitely from Hridya’s mother and her minions, as I made my way into the courtroom, alongside my lawyer, Siddharth, and Anand, my friend.

“Talk about the devil.” Hridya’s mother, who sat directly behind her daughter and her lawyer, Ishaan, said in a not-so-low tune, ensuring it got in a wisp to my ear, but I in turn gave no heed to her but kept on with my walk, to my side of the courtroom.

“Mama!” Hridya whispered and yelled to her mother, her face palming in frustration.

“What?” Her mom huffed in response, folding both hands and looking to the other side. “You know I’m speaking the truth.” She murmured.

“Mum, please behave,” Hridya said with gritted teeth, turning to the other side, only to meet my gaze with mine, who quickly looked away.

“Weird.” She wondered why her heart skipped a beat while she nervously played with her fingers, with her eyes darting back and forth to our two-year-old daughter Diya, who sat close to the jury box, playing with Mr. Floppy, the pink teddy I got for her on her second birthday.

I watched as Hridya shook her head in regret, as memories must have come flooding in. She gave a chortle about the fact that we had come to Dubai some years earlier for our honeymoon, and now we are back here for more or less the opposite of what had occurred earlier.

“Court!” The bailiff said, announcing the arrival of the judge and pulling her out of her now-unending train of thought.

“Court!” The bailiff repeated once the judge had settled on her seat, letting others follow suit.

“Can the opening statement precede?” The judge said, flipping through the documents before her bench.

Hridya’s lawyer, Ishaan, stepped out to the front of the jury box to address the jury on the trial that was about to take place on the custody claim of me and Hridya’s daughter, Diya. After which, Siddharth, my lawyer, stepped forward to give his opening statement as well.

“We now proceed to the presentation of the evidence. Over to you.” She flipped to another page before pulling down her glasses to the rim of her nose to have a clearer view of Hridya’s lawyer, who stepped forth again.

“My Lord.” He curtsied, then turned over to the court audience.

“As you all must have known or noticed, my client here, Ms. Hridya, has not only been emotionally downcast and stressed but drained too. Handling a divorce had a really hard toll on her. As a wife to her ex-husband, Mr. Rahul, she was nothing but

a good wife, a down-to-earth and submissive wife.” An audible gasp from my side of the courtroom was heard, then subtle chattering ensued.

“Order!” The judge slammed the hammer on the bench, bringing everyone to an abrupt silence.

“Please proceed.”

“Sorry for the interruption, my Lord.” Ishaan arranged his suit jacket and cleared his throat. “She has also been a good mother to their daughter, Diya. The one who has always been there physically and otherwise for their daughter, even when her ex-husband, Mr. Rahul, had been out having an affair with his secretary.” An audible gasp and murmuring began afresh in the whole courtroom.

“Objection, my Lord!” Siddharth stood from behind his desk, clearly infuriated.

“Objection overruled. Please continue, Attorney Ishaan.” The judge gave Siddharth a look, forcing him to sit back, before looking back to the lawyer on the stand.

“Even with all my client has been through, she still ensured that her daughter was her top priority. Talking about her daughter Diya, in her last school term she came out with an outstanding result and won an award for punctuality. Why? “He looked around the courtroom with a smile, as he had gotten the full audience of everyone, he kept on, “It is because my client here, Ms. Hridya, played the role of a super mother, getting up very early to make breakfast for the family, packed and prepared lunch for not just her daughter but her Cheating ex-husband too and ensured their little daughter was in school on time.

Notwithstanding that, she took full responsibility for her daughter’s home assessments, ensured everything was well and in order, and when her strength failed her as a human, her mother did a good job taking care of Diya.”

“That’s a lie!” I suddenly stood up, not minding the pleas from my lawyer and my friend behind me.

“I will not give your client a fair hearing if he keeps up with this. This is my last warning. Carry on, Attorney Ishaan.”

“All I’m saying here, my Lord, is that my client here is the rightful and only person to take custody of their daughter Diya. I rest my case, my Lord.” He took a bow and walked back to the seat he occupied close to Hridya, but not without noticing the wink her mother threw his way, giggling like a schoolchild alongside the two minions she brought with her to court.

“Attorney Siddharth, over to you.” The judge said this as she scribbled into the open file before her.

“My Lord.” Siddharth took a slight bow before facing the audience.

“My client here, the accused, agrees to most of the accusation being laid on him, with very reasonable excuse to them, which shows that my client isn’t only responsible but ready and willing to admit to his mistakes to make amends and do better. And that, my Lord, should be the first and most considered reason for raising a child. I mean, we learn from mistakes, right? You can’t tell me that Ms. Hridya was the perfect girl in two shoes.” He paced and stopped directly in front of where Hridya and her lawyer sat. “We are humans, and humans are not perfect, which means my client’s ex-wife is either lying or isn’t human. I’d want to believe it’s the former.” He shrugged, walking back to his former position.

“My client here agrees to have an affair with his company secretary, but then whose fault was it?” He threw the question to the audience for a few seconds before carrying on. “His ex-wife, Ms. Hridya.”

“Objection, my Lord.” Ishaan took a stand from where he sat.

“Overruled. Carry on, attorney Siddharth.”

“The defendant claims to be a perfect wife and a good mother when that is untrue. My client here was forced to find comfort and emotional support from the hands of another woman, who was there to listen to him and let him vent out his emotional crises to her, crises that were caused by no other than the perfect ex-wife here, who never tends to listen to her husband but rather to her mother, who was nothing but a bad influence on her and was always nagging.

My Lord, I know that is not a good enough excuse for him to go outside to have an affair, but because his ex-wife started it by keeping late nights and denying him his husbandly rights, he couldn’t continue being pushed against the wall.

And as the good man that he is, he never laid a finger on his wife despite all she did, which shows and proves the responsibility of my client; he isn’t a woman beater, nor did he ever lay a hand on his child, unlike the defendant mother, whom he caught scolding and beating his child. When he tried comforting her, she only made his life unbearable for him in his home, using his ex-wife against him.”

“Objection, my Lord.”

“Overruled.”

“My client here was working tooth and nail, just to make ends meet for the family. The punctuality role claimed by the defendant was all with the help of my client here, who ensured his daughter went early to school by driving and dropping her off at school before heading back to the house to drop his wife, who only acted like decoration in the whole ordeal, before heading back to work.

The so-called assignments done by the defendant were always cross-checked and properly done when my client got back from

his workplace. Financially, my client can take care of the upkeep and grooming of his daughter; physically, the job my client is into makes it flexible for him to have enough time for his daughter; and emotionally, my client seems to understand his daughter more, her needs, and even the selection of her favorite toys.

My client here is also lenient enough to let his daughter spend some weekends with her mother, so she would not feel completely left out of her life.”

“Your time limit is being exceeded.” The judge interrupted.

“I rest my case.” Siddharth took a bow and walked back to his seat.

“Attorney Ishaan, you can come up for your closing argument; you have just two minutes.” The judge scribbled more into the file before her, then looked up.

“My Lord.” He took a curt bow before facing the court audience. “I’ll be asking a few questions to the accused.” He said this before swiftly moving over to where I now stood.

“Did you ever come home drunk?” He asked, noticing the change in my demeanor.

“I did, but—”

“That will be all, Mr. Rahul.” Ishaan interrupted mid-sentence, not letting me speak again.

“My Lord.” Ishaan has begun, having turned back to the judge. “The accused here did not only keep an affair outside marriage but also came back home drunk some nights, and who knows what other damage he might have caused?”

“Objection, my Lord!” Siddharth voiced out.

“Carry on.”

“My client admitted to coming back home drunk once, and that was it. There was no other funny business afterward.” Siddharth said before taking his seat.

“Still, it makes no difference, my Lord; a man who puts his family first will never come home drunk. It is obvious, my Lord, with this said evidence, that the accused is not fit enough to take custody of their child, but rather that my client has full rights to the custody of their daughter. I rest my case.” Ishaan said, taking a bow and walking back to his seat.

“Over to you, attorney Siddharth. Two minutes.” The judge looked up to him.

“If the court permits, I would like my client to give his testimony.”

“Objection!” Ishaan called out.

“Overruled. Attorney Siddharth, if your client makes a testimony, you will not be allowed to give a closing argument, or you can as well go ahead with your argument with no testimony. The choice is yours.” She pushed back her glasses to the face.

“My client will give his testimony,” Siddharth stated.

I went ahead to give a summary of how my beautiful relationship with my wife went sour all because of the interference of my ex-mother-in-law, who made it her duty to always intrude on our matrimony space. I condoled it at first, but it became unbearable, and life became a living hell for me in my house. I admitted losing my temper, but that was because I caught my ex-mother-in-law scolding and dragging the ears of my child, and all I had ever done was love and take care of my ex-wife and child until the evil interruption of my ex-mother-in-law.

“We’ve come to the end of this case, and I’ve heard from both sides that the judgment and final verdict would be passed in three weeks; this case is adjourned.” The judge said, picking up

the necessary documents sprawled on her bench, and got up to leave.

“Court!” The bailiff called out, making everyone rise as the judge took her leave.

I couldn’t help but look to Hridya’s side, who again exchanged glances with me. I couldn’t help but feel the deep love we had tried to bury between us as I felt my heart sink.

I went home, completely distraught, and laid on my makeshift bed.

With everything that roared in my head, I decided to take out Tinder from my phone.

As I proceeded to do that, a message came in. My eyes lit up, and my body vibrated. It was from no other person than Maya.

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Chapter 4

“Maya, where have you been?” I sprang up from my sofa.

“I’ve been away; something happened. I wish you were there.”

“I’m sorry, I’m here now. What happened?”

“No, you really should have been there for me. You should have tried to reach me; I don’t know how, but you could have. I was expecting You are a tech genius, right? You could have thought about something.”

“I know, baby. I was also caught up. divorce and child custody. It was within the week.”

“Oh, I’m sorry about that; I was being selfish. How was it? Did it go well?”

“The divorce went well; the child custody? Not so much. They came with a lot of dirt. It was crazy. The judge had to adjourn the case.”

“I’m sorry about that, baby.”

“It’s cool. That’s enough about me; tell me what happened to you.”

“You really want to know?”

“I really want to. I care about you enough, baby.”

“Okay...”

I waited rather impatiently. It was indicated that she had been

typing. It had reached a gruesome five minutes of waiting, which tormented my soul. I threaded around my living room on that warm and dark night. I was worried and sick. What could be taking her this long to say? I would think anytime I looked at the screen of my phone. “Whatever it is, the possibility of it being something bad is 98%.”

I placed the phone on the glass table and walked into the kitchen. I wanted to get a glass of juice to calm myself down. Out of the fridge, a pack of orange juice was removed and poured into a clean glass on the kitchen counter. I gulped down its content and poured another in. I then covered the remaining content and returned it to the fridge. Then, I took the glass contents in my hand and walked back to the living room. I picked up my phone, and simultaneously, a text dropped it. It was a long one, but I could see standout words like killer, relationships, and chasing as my eyes sifted through the words rapidly.

I immediately sat down and read from the top. This was the content of the text.

“So, I’ve been on Tinder for a couple of months, dating back to last year. November would make it a year. But that is not the case. I’m a young lady, and the exuberance is still beaming in me. During my stint on the crazy side of Tinder, I had dated close to three guys who I met in this space.”

“That’s approximately two months for each guy,” I thought.

“Now, these guys stayed around, and it was always beautiful during the first few weeks. Later on, it became as abusive as it could get, and I had to walk out. The first two were normal men, but the third one was not as I had imagined. You know how girls love when a Mafia Lord, or a serial killer who controls a large and feared gang, picks them as his one true love, loves only them, and only submits to them?

Yes, those kinds on Wattpad make me cringe. It's all a fantasy, lol. The point is, that things started off well. I was living the life; I was untouchable in the streets of Ciudad Juarez. Carlos was a king. He ran an organization of serial killers, and he was also a serial killer. The best there was. People would hire him up for assassinations, and once you knew Carlos was coming for you personally, you could as well dig your grave.

He is like a Mexican John Wick without a dog. The only problem I had was that he was a fucker and never respected other women. He could kill their husbands or boyfriends and take their wives to do as he pleased. Right in front of me, but he would say he loved me. I wanted to get used to it, but my image was also being tarnished as the girl of Carlos. Things went extremely badly; I had to break up with him.”

Good idea, I bobbed my head in affirmation.

“... But, you see, I heard from my inside sources that the feared Carlos cried in his bedroom and refused to eat for more than two days because I left. I do sometimes commend myself for breaking the heart of the most dangerous man in Juarez, but you see, Carlos has come back for revenge. He threatens to take me fully as his wife and lock me up, with no promise of me seeing daylight again or feeling the dirty floors of the street. For the whole time I was offline, I was on the run. With the help of some people, I was able to evade his henchmen. Now, he has threatened to come for me by himself, and honestly, I don't know what to do. I had to come back to tell you just in case you don't see me online any longer.”

“No, no, no, nothing like that would ever happen. Tell me where you are, and I will come get you myself, bring you back to Dubai with me, and make sure you have the best security. We could start a family and live the life we only talk about by text. Okay, now I'm talking out of context, but tell me.”

“Okay, just in case they get my phone or try to hack into my account,”

It took about five minutes, but then a voice note dropped. It was the first time I heard her voice.

Some emotion had clouded my mind, as I thought of Maya’s voice as the most beautiful I had ever heard.

“Hi, daddy...” She giggled. Then, in the background, I heard a knock on the door. This caused her to stop talking. Another knock came. “I’m coming!” She screamed back.

The knock on the door became louder, and it sounded as though the person behind it was trying to knock down the door. Through the voice note, I could hear some jamming movement against the door and shouts in Spanish, “Abre la Puerta, Maya! Solo Quiero hablar,” followed by more pounding.

“We don’t have much time...”

Then, I began to hear familiar sounds.

Morse code was being sent through the note rapidly. I only realized it after the fourth sound.

After she had finished, she said, “Find me,” then the door opened, followed by the shattering of glass.

And that was the end of the voice note.

Quickly, I took out my book note and pen and began transcribing the Morse code into a book. I would listen to it more than once, or twice just to be sure of the words because, to me, they were extremely delicate.

After about twenty minutes, I had completely decoded the message.

It read the location of a place, one of prominence, and the one place the people never frolicked with AV VINCENTE GUERRERO 101, CIUDAD JUAREZ.

After I had achieved what I fought so much for, I went ahead to listen to the voice note again, this time more calmly. I could pick out various things. I could hear more than three voices in the background; outside, I could hear shouts and screams of people playing football; twice, a car sped past; and I could hear footsteps that moved extremely faster than normal.

After I had done this, I replied, “I’ll come find you.”

With the content of the voice note, it was either that she was still on the run or she was kidnapped and I hoped it was the former. At least, that way, she would know I was coming for her.

And then I turned off my mobile data. I thought for a couple of seconds before I stood up and shot up the stairs, in the middle of the night.

Quietly, I opened the door and met my wife, who was seated on the bed with their photo album. The moment she saw me walk in, she covered the album with the duvet, but I had already seen it. A wave of guilt ran through me, but I shrugged it off and went straight to my drawer.

I began searching for my passport and visa. I remembered things like that that I had given to my wife for safekeeping. But then, I refused to ask and instead searched on my own.

“Rahul, about the court case—” Hridya finally spoke after a couple of minutes.

“It’s fine, Hridya,” I interrupted. “It is a court case after all. We just want someone to take care of our daughter, don’t we?”

All the while I said these, I never raised my head, nor did I turn in her direction. My face was buried in the drawers as I searched

one after another. Another minute of silence continued before Hridya spoke again.

“What are you looking for?” After she realized that whatever I searched for, I had made no progress in finding it.

“It’s nothing. Can I be left alone?”

“I’m just trying to help, Rahul.”

“You don’t have to. You can do any other thing; I think I feel better and fine on my own.”

“Why are you being so stubborn?”

“Why are you being so good?”

“Because I care.”

“And I don’t. Happy now? I just want this case to be over so I can get my normal life back, irrespective of how it turns out.”

Those words pierced through Hridya like a flaming Excalibur. She sat rooted on the bed and watched me continue to rummage through a drawer. She bit her lips in anger, and she tried to hold in the tears.

Knowing she would lose the battle she fought against herself, she angrily got out of bed and stormed out.

I did not flinch, and after I knew she was completely out of the picture, I stood up to her drawer and began to search. There, I found what I had been seeking. The passport and visa I needed to travel I carried it up and weaved through the pages. After I was sure of it, I walked towards the table and planted it there.

Then, I opened my wardrobe and began taking out clothes I would use on my trip. I had already made my plan. After I arranged my clothes, I would book a flight to Mexico, irrespective of the amount or at short notice. I never completely understood

what pushed me to agree on going to save a person whom I had not seen before; completely diving into danger was not my thing; watching from the sidelines was, but I had already readied my plans. I knew exactly how I was going to move the moment I landed in Ciudad Juarez.

**

Hridya

I ran down the stairs. I wanted some time alone. Straight to the wooden bar in the living room, situated just behind the sofa that faced the television, I went. I took out a precious whiskey and poured it into a small glass cup. At once, I gulped it down. I took another one without hesitation. I wanted to let go of the sober feeling and dive into a world different from what I was going through. Then, at the corner of my eye, I saw Rahul's phone buzz. A notification had made the phone's screen flash light before going dark again. That threw some ideas into my head. I looked at the stairs cautiously like a prey watching out for its predator, then at the phone like a predator sizing its prey. Quietly, I tiptoed to his phone and turned it on.

It was easy; I knew his password. I typed in my daughter's birthday, as the face ID didn't match, and it directed me to the home button.

I went through his SMS messages and found irrelevant messages. I went through his WhatsApp, and the only strong conversation was with Anand, and it never went past work or the recent case. Just as I was about to give up, a notification came up from Tinder for potential matches.

I looked back instinctively at the stairs as I opened the app.

The first messages were just "Hi" from people who texted him first. I wanted to skip the top messages because they all looked the same when my finger mistakenly tapped on Maya's name.

The text opened, and so did my eyes.

I swiped down a couple of times and still could not reach the top chat. The more I scrolled, the more my heart gave way to tears, which clung to my eyelids. I felt a sudden shot of heat roll through my body. I could feel my heart beat harder as the heat spammed through my chest.

My hands began to tremble. I read through the texts hungrily, like a starving dog that had seen its first meal in a week. The more I read, the more I became traumatized. The “I love you and love you” being shared between the two parties was enough to give me a stroke.

This is why he didn’t care anymore. This is why he went on to sign the papers, and he’s traveling because of her. He doesn’t even care about the case. I thought as I finally reached the end of the text.

Hot streams of tears ran through my cheeks, and I sniffled in I stood up and marched up the stairs with the phone in my hand. There, I met Rahul arranging his clothes into a box that he kept on a bed. I walked over and stood between him and the bedroom table.

Rahul

She raised my phone at my face defiantly, “It’s Maya, right? She’s the one, right?”

I looked at my phone, and then at my wife’s face. I let out a sigh, shook my head, then turned back to what I was doing.

“Answer me, Rahul Vinod!” She cried out.

“Do not be insensitive, Hridya.”

“Do not be insensitive, you say. Now I’m being insensitive?”

“Of course!” I smacked a cloth into the box. “Yes, you are being insensitive. When you go out on dates and come back late at

night, even when you have a daughter at home, did you ever stop for one second to think? Did you? Now that I reciprocate your action, I'm the bad person. How do you women sometimes think? Do you think it's fair only when it applies to you? That is plain absurd. Just let me do my thing, please."

"You're not even denying it," she said as she looked at me, shocked at the man I had become in just a few weeks.

"Why would I deny something like that? After all, we are divorced. What right do you have to question what I do? You realize that we are no longer husband and wife, and you are only staying here because of the case, right? After that, you can kiss seeing me bye-bye."

"Rahul, you underestimate me way too much, Rahul. I would not let a woman break what we have."

"What do we have?" I mocked a laugh and turned towards her. "You already broke what we have. The moment you let your mother brainwash you into all these games, you decided to play. You started everything."

Hridya fumed. She kept her eyes on me, and I let out a wry smile as I waited for whatever she had to say. Although I rarely talked much, you could never win me in a game of word exchange unless I was wrong, and I would not even prolong the talk by more than two lines for myself.

She looked behind her and saw the passport and visa lying on the table. She looked at me as her expression changed from anger. She pulled a devilish grin and began to walk backward. The wry smile on my face vanished as I knew what she had in mind.

I took one step at a time, my hands elbow-level in the air with the palms facing the ground, as I tried to calm her down from doing what she intended. "Don't do what I know you want to do, Hridya; I'm begging you."

Hridya turned around swiftly when she was at arm's length of the table and went for the visa and passport. I bolted towards her in an attempt to stop her.

Right there in front of my eyes, it happened so fast that I couldn't stop her, yet so slowly that I could pinpoint everything that led to the destruction of my visa and passport.

As I bolted to catch Hridya, I stepped on a cloth that was littered on the floor and lost my balance. This dragged the victim's leg behind me. I caught myself and pushed forward just in time for me to raise my head and see Hridya, who, with one hand, shaded my laptop from the edge of the table to the floor.

It was a good distraction, and I knew which was more important to me at that point. A MacBook Pro was not something I wanted to go back to the large mall just to get. So, I dove and saved the laptop just in time before it kissed the ground. I guarded it in an embrace and let my back take the brunt of the fall.

Like a triumphant queen, Hridya stood in front of me with scattered hair and red eyes. She tore the Visa and passports into shreds while I watched upside down. After she was satisfied with how much she had torn it, she let the pieces fall on my face. "Stranger things, isn't it?" My subconscious spoke in my mind.

I laughed at the joke, which did not go down well with Hridya. She threw my phone on my body and walked out of the room while slamming the door behind her. I heard rapid footsteps as she went away, but I decided not to move an inch from where I was. The papers from my visa had settled on and around my body, and I smiled at the ceiling. My MacBook is still stuck in my embrace. I relished the moment again and knew there was nothing I could have done to change it.

After about five minutes, I stood up, dusted my body, and continued to pack. After I was done, with the clothes stacking

on the deep side of the box, I took out a key from the frame head of the bed for a drawer that was made into my bed. I inserted it, turned the lock twice, and drew it out. There was a place where I kept the tools I believed I needed for the journey. One after the other, I removed them and strapped them to the net-covered side of the bag.

Among these items were a binocular, a camera, a magnifying glass, a tape, a notebook and pen, an audio recorder, a watch that records videos in 1080p, a flashlight, a lighter, and a set of three GPS trackers.

After I fixed them properly in my bag, I zipped it up.

From the floor, I picked up my phone and texted Anand, “I need to see you first thing at noon tomorrow, at Safa Park, please. It’s urgent.”

After I had sent the message, I went back to picking up the pieces of paper littered on the floor and discarding them outside my window.

I dusted my hands and looked out the window. The humid breeze swept through my face and pushed at my hair. The curtain rose, and

“Cut! Cut! I’m not acting in a Bollywood romance movie; shall we carry on?”

... I went outside my room and stopped at the stairs. I spotted Hridya in my spot. She had turned on the television and was watching it from where she lay. I stared at her more than usual before going back up to occupy the bed. There, I slept.

The alarm woke me up with a start. I had no time to lose, as every second that ticked gave away the time for whoever was trying to catch Maya to implement his plans. I took a quick brush and a shower. Then, I put on a casual black abaya, took

out some documents I would need to get my visa replaced, and placed them in a portfolio. I had to go to three places before the afternoon, and I had to make a few tweaks too.

“Okay, okay, okay,” I mumbled to myself after.

I got ready and stood in front of the mirror.

I walked out of the room and down the stairs. There, I met Hridya in a squatting position as she played with Diya, who was on the sofa.

Our eyes met, but as soon as the contact was made, Hridya took her eyes off and focused on Diya. She dragged her cheeks playfully as she giggled.

I walked up to them and patted Diya on the head.

“How are you, Diya?”

“I’m good! Daddy.”

Daddy, where are you going?”

“Err, I want to meet your uncle Anand. We want to do some Daddy stuff.”

“Okay, buy something for me and Mummy when you’re back!”

I looked at Hridya as I rubbed my daughter’s cheeks.

“Sure, I will,” I answered with doubt in my head.

I leaned over and kissed her forehead. Then I turned around and walked out of the house.

I was greeted by the morning sun and temperate nature. I had ordered a cab, but it had taken longer than expected. I waited, however.

Five minutes later, the cab drove to a stop in front of me. I was unimpressed by the state of the car, as it was almost covered

in dirt and water. I did not fancy waiting for another ride and being a point of attraction for passersby, and I did not want to disappoint the driver, so I opened the car and went in.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I was caught up in traffic, and before I could locate the fastest route here, I was—"

I raised my hand to command silence. "You don't have to worry. I've entered your cab before. It doesn't smell like this. It had a more natural and damp smell than cabs usually give. But you sprayed a men's perfume—one I'm familiar with—which ironically has already given you out. Another thing that did give you out," I smiled, "is the white crumbs of rice. It shows you were eating. So, I totally understand. We are all humans and need to survive, but next time, try to be honest. And from what you tell me, it seems you had to take a route that wasn't favorable so you could get here faster—one filled with puddles. That would explain why your car is this dirty on the outside. But then, this is a perfect interpretation of not judging a book by its cover because inside is really comfortable to feel."

The driver was speechless. He turned around and held the driver's seat.

"Oh, we can go now, but before we go, can you take me to where you got your rice? I need to buy some before you drop me off at the police station."

"Are you a detective, sir?" The driver asked as he started the ignition of the car.

"A detective? No, I'm not, but I might be soon."

"You should be. You're a good one."

"I will think about it." I smiled and looked out the window as we passed my neighboring houses.

The young boy at the gate opened the gate and waved at the car as we passed into the main road.

The driver went on a slow ride, as I did not seem in a hurry. He turned to a street that had experienced some potholes. It did not require dodging the potholes; it required choosing the best one that would be suitable for your car to pass through.

The gallops were traumatic to me, and most to the driver, as his car experienced some hits and scratches under it.

“You know, I can permit this to count as traffic. So, I did get it right that you passed a puddle.”

“Yes, sir,” the driver said, looking through the rear mirror. “That is actually right, but I’m trying to make up for lost ground. Please, let me be the one to pay for your meal.”

“You don’t have to. You did nothing bad. Understandably, you are simply a victim of certain circumstances, as every one of us here”

“I know sir, but I do insist”

“Okay then, I agree that you can pay, but we would split the bills, 50/50, agreed?”

“Well, you are persistent sir, and I’m sure I cannot change your mind more than this, so I agree”

“Thank you very much. And you can turn on the radio too, let us hear what the stations have for us today”

The driver did as he was told, as the man behind the radio dabbled over some social activities with a guest. I listened attentively as we went.

Then, we pulled to a stop. A stall was on the left. The shed had a light bulb that was held by a wire, about three stoves behind on a different table, each with large pots, and large containers in front. People gathered around to buy from the stall in numbers, somehow paying zero attention to the neighboring shops. Two

boys who wore identical shirts stood in the middle of the chaos as they dished out food rapidly, placed it in a customer's hand, exchanged it with money, and moved on to the nearest and available customer.

"Here it is," the driver said. He wound down the tinted glass of the cab for me to order. He signaled one of the boys, who after seeing the car parked in front of them and the person who called him, neglected other customers, much to their disdain, and attended to him.

"A plate of rice and two pieces of meat. Add enough sauce to it, thank you. How much would that cost?"

"Twelve dirhams," the seller replied.

I gave a nod, "Make it two"

He turned to the driver, "We will make it seventy, thirty"

"There's no problem sir."

They brought twenty-four dirhams and handed them over to the boy, who squeezed through the crowd and worked his way back to the shed. There, he began dishing out the order, while I and his driver waited.

"You know sir, there is something about the local sheds that the big restaurant doesn't have."

"Interesting, tell me what it is"

"Let's say there are a few. The food is cooked over good firewood, not gas. There is this taste that it brings out. I'm telling you; you would be addicted."

"Yes, the traditional method of cooking brings out more taste than its modern counterpart, but then it is more tedious."

"Yes, and also the aroma is magnificent. You can perceive the mix of different flavors, can you? It draws the people to it like flies. If you look closely, there are also well-to-do men coming

out here to buy. Most of them sit among the commoners and converse.”

I looked around, and truly, saw all that was said. “Maybe someday, I would also have the time to sit among the people. For now, however, the backseat of this car is more preferable.”

Soon, the food came, and we drove off.

It took thirty minutes to reach the police station. I took one pack of food and left the other one in the car with a written note saying “For your Lunch.”

A kind gesture, the driver alluded, after he must have found it.

I went into the police station and spoke to the officer on the counter. She was a female with a junior rank.

“I want to file a report for a damaged Visa please.”

“Please write your name here and wait over there,” she pointed at a seat that was glued to the wall.

There, I sat and began to eat, while I waited.

I grew impatient after I had not been attended to. I wanted to be tended to as fast as the 911 in the United States.

I drummed my legs on the floor and looked at my watch. It had flown past the nine-hour mark.

I raised my head at the counter just in time to see her waving her hand at me.

“Ah!” I stood up and picked up my portfolio.

I and the junior rank walked into an Inspector’s office. She opened the door for me, and I walked in.

“You may sit” the inspector pointed at the chair in front of me.

“Thank you very much”

“So, Visa replacement sir?” I stretched my hands out.

"Of course," I gave him my portfolio to go through the documents. The inspector flipped through the documents inside. "So, it got stolen or got damaged?"

"Damaged, Sir"

"How?"

"Well, it was due to my carelessness, I must admit. I was trying to burn a little bit of littered paper and didn't know my two-year-old daughter had somehow mixed it up with the papers. I figured it out when I had scattered the ash. What you see there, is the remains"

The inspector held up a burnt green passport that held Dubai's logo.

"It's fine, that can be settled. Take this form," he reached out to his drawer and took out a form that required him to fill it. My name, Date of birth, and other necessary information. This I did. After that, the Inspector took the form and placed it back in his drawer. Then he wrote a statement.

"This, you would have to take to the Homeland Security office. I'm sure you know where that is?"

"Of course, I do. Thank you for your time"

We stood and shook each other before I left.

As I exited the door, I checked my wristwatch. It was ten minutes to ten.

I walked past the junior ranked officer and simultaneously gave a nod to her greeting, then proceeded to exit the station. I was still in line with time, just as I had predicted.

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Chapter 5

As I stepped out to the curb, a cab came into view. I hailed at it, and it rose slowly to where I stood.

“Homeland security,” I said as the blind wound down.

“Let’s go,” the driver said, giving me an affirmative nod.

I hopped into the car and shut the door as it drove away.

“How many minutes would it take to get to my destination?” I asked.

“Approximately fifteen minutes, sir.”

“Ah! I see. Double your pay if you make it in ten minutes.”

The driver did not need to be told twice. One look through the rear mirror and eye contact was all he needed to press the gas pedals. The driver zoomed and maneuvered past several cars, beating traffic lights on his way. I had to hold back the seat and keep my heart tight as I was taken on a ride I wished I never wanted.

In less than eight minutes, we were at our destination. As I stepped on safe ground, I heaved a sigh of relief. I then turned around and offered my payment.

“Thank you, sir,” the driver gestured by bowing his face before he drove off.

“Well, that was something.” I turned and walked into the office.

“Good grief, my head hurts.” I placed my palm on the right side of my head as a security guard at the door opened the door for me. The pain was like a shot through my head.

“Welcome sir”

“Thank you very much.”

I located the counter and dropped off my complaint to the receptionist, then waited for ten minutes before I was attended to.

I issued the report I got from the police to the person in charge. A grumpy middle-aged man who has strains of gray hair and wears glasses. He took the report from me, then told me to sit before going into his office. I waited another ten minutes before the man came out and handed me a file that gave me a pass to meet the Indian Embassy so I could get a new passport and visa.

“That would be 200 dirhams,” he said.

“Of course!” I replied and handed him the equivalent currency.

As I exited, I checked my time; it was 10:37 AM, and I had one last place to go.

I boarded a cab to one of the Indian Embassy branches in Dubai.

I picked the branch situated in the diplomatic area, off the airport road.

I picked up a cab and went straight to the embassy. It was a moderate-looking building with the Indian flag flying high. The building had a normal build of bricks and cement and was painted gray.

There, I met a young lady of great beauty. She talked eloquently in English but still kept her Indian accent. Other times, she would converse fluently in Hindi.

It was a quick one, however, as I met the lady who would issue me a new visa and passport.

After getting that done, she admitted that I would be receiving it in four to five working days.

“I’ll give you a thousand dirhams if I can get it in at least two days. Please, it’s really urgent.”

The woman adjusted her glasses and stared at him. “Make it a thousand five hundred, and I’ll see to it.”

“Deal.” I stood up and thanked the lady.

“It would be sent to your address as a special treat for doing good business with you.”

“Please, I need your help on that. When sending it, do call me. Please. My call line is available to you.”

“You have no problem then.”

As I left the building, I checked my time. It was past eleven, and it would take more than half an hour to reach Safa Park.

Without much time to wait, I got into a cab and told the driver to speed up. I did not mind being zipped through the streets of Dubai and did not hesitate to give the driver an extra note for a job well done.

After he dropped me off, I walked into the green serenity of the park. There, I found a bench and sat on it while I waited for Anand.

The birds chirped and flew around under the rising sun. I checked my watch and found out it was five minutes to twelve. From the corner of my eye, I saw Anand walk towards me.

“You’re on your last day of staying at home, right?” I stood and stretched out my arms.

“Ah, yes. I am.” Anand shook him.

“You are indeed looking very good. You’ve gotten over the pale skin.”

“And when I go back, I will gain it again. I’m just happy my mother is at least responding to treatment,” he said, sitting down.

“I see. That is good news, I must admit.”

“I can’t agree more. So, what is it that you want to discuss with me that you cannot text me?”

“It’s about Maya.”

“Oh, your Latina girlfriend. What is wrong with her? She wants to come here.”

“I do wish Anand, but it seems I would have to be the one going there to find her and help her.”

Anand sat up and studied me. He found no sarcasm.

“You are being serious?”

“Of course I am. She has not been online for a long time.

“But you said you guys were texting?”

“I know what I said; I lied. Now listen, after she came back from the exile I thought she was, she came back with bad news.”

I narrated everything to Anand, from top to bottom. Opening all sealed lids on the matter at hand.

“And I’m the only one who knows how to find her because I cracked the code.”

“Why don’t you just give the code to the authorities and let them handle their job? You don’t just jump into things like that. You’re not Jack Frost; you would experience cold feet.”

“You have no idea, Anand. I know I have to go. That’s why I want you to stand in for me during the court case in a week’s time.”

“Are you mad?”

“No, Anand. I’m asking as a friend. I need you to help me with this.

“Let’s take a walk.”

Both of us stood up and walked on the stone pavement of the park, which snaked from end to end and had branches.

“It might seem awkward if you, as the father, are not around during the custody case of your daughter. I don’t know how our lawyer might do it, but it looks like a big disadvantage on our side already.”

“It looks, I know. We can just make up something. I had work. And the rest? It’s easy, Anand; I just need you to discuss it with Siddharth for me. I would be highly happy if you do.”

“You’re sure that you would just zip in, get her, and be back, right?”

“Of course, I would.”

“You’re sure you don’t need support? I would come if you asked me to.”

“Then who would stand in for me?”

“We could hire someone, Rahul.”

“I’ve already made up my mind on this. You’re the only one I trust, and you know me better than any other person here. All you have to do is stand in for me. I can handle myself.”

Anand gave much thought to this, as his humming sound remained audible.

“This wasn’t the plan, but I’ll do it. You’re my friend after all.”

“Thank you, brother. I knew I could count on you.” I kept a hand on Anand’s shoulder as I shook him with the other.

“So, when are you going on your trip?”

“Two days from now.”

“Why two days? It sounds urgent.”

“I had to get a new visa and passport. My old one had seen better days and gone to the great beyond.”

“Ah! I see.” He rubbed his beard.

“Right now, I just have to go back home and play cool. Then, on the day of the trip...” I twirled my right palm in the air three times, then waved it away. “I would fly away before anyone knew it.”

“It seems you have everything already planned out.” Anand chuckled.

“From the roots to its leaves”

“But it’s surprising. Diving into the face of danger for a woman And not just any woman—one whom you have seen just two pictures of. It is crazy, and I’m not even exaggerating. In my life, I’ve never met a woman who would make me do all that.”

“Your love meter died after Bulbul broke your heart back in the days of MIT. I still remember—” I began laughing.

“Don’t say it,” Anand said with a straight face.

“I still remember that night. You walked with her in the rain to her cousin’s house and walked back home. Only to find out the next day through me, of course, that it was not her cousin, but her main boyfriend,” I burst out laughing again. “And you actually thought you were the only one in her life. And you did

not even lay your pipes during the whole ordeal. It's still funny. Imagine taking your girl with your own hands to the guy who pins her to the wall and hands her over for free."

"I think it was a bad idea coming here."

I almost choked on laughter as I tried to calm myself. "I'm... I'm sorry. Some memories are just gold."

"That's it; I'm going home." Anand increased his steps and went ahead of me. I, in turn, ran behind Anand, still trying to stop the laughter.

"Hold on! My friend"

"Don't come near me." Anand found himself laughing as he took to his hills.

We raced each other through the park like children.

After we had stopped racing, we stood to catch our breath.

"You know, this reminds me of Gabriel," I said in between catching my breath.

"Yes, Gabriel. Where is he now?"

"I have no idea."

"He was never caught up in tech life. I still remember that he did it for his father. I hear he is a traveler now. The last time I heard from him was two years ago. He has been dead to the media too."

"He could be anywhere right now."

"What are the odds he is in Mexico, Ciudad Juarez, to be precise, by the time I get there?"

"The odds are 1/100. The possibility of seeing him even is 1/1000."

"That's pretty impossible."

“Exactly.”

I checked my time. “Oh, brother, I have to go now.”

“Would I get to see you before you go?” Anand asked.

“I don’t think that would be necessary. We would be in touch, however.”

I parted ways with Anand as I headed home. On the curb, a cab I was well too familiar with pulled across.

I smiled as he opened the door and occupied the car.

“Home, sir?”

“Home, but we would stop at that stall again. I want to get some food there for my wife—for my friend and daughter,” I caught myself.

The driver, who was not fast enough to understand, stepped on the gas pedals and into the main road.

“It seems you passed there again. Your tires gave you away.”

“Yes, sir. I got a chance to see them preparing another round of rice. I guess before we reach them, they should have finished. This means you would be served hot.”

“It’s alright; I was hoping to catch it hot.”

I checked my watch. It was past the four-hour mark. I realized we had spent a lot of time at the park.

“I want to thank you for the lunch, sir.”

“Oh, that was nothing; trust me.”

“Haha! It made my day, sir, and I did not get to spend as much money on the road. That little thing was everything needed.”

“Haha, I totally understand.”

“Here, sir, something to keep you busy.” The driver handed me a newspaper to go through as they drove.

“I appreciate this,” I said, as I located the crossword puzzle and took out my pen.

It took us a thirty-minute drive to arrive at the stall, and in that time, I had completed the puzzle. I repeated the same procedure as I had earlier in the day, but this time I requested four takeaways. That settled, they drove to the house and stopped to get some dibs at Mama’s shed.

It was a slow drive through the estate as my destination loomed nearby. I had a little bit of insecurity as the car edged closer to my courtyard. I felt like I was betraying them, yet it felt like they were not my family, except for my daughter.

I stepped out of the car and, of course, left one plate there.

I took the rest into the house and shared it among Diya and Hridya.

I was going to be the best dad to Diya.

That I did for the next two days before I got a call and left home early to catch my flight.

During the flight, I met a man who kept blabbering about traveling for fun in Ciudad. He was skeptical of that because, based on his research, Ciudad was one of the most dangerous, if not the most dangerous, places on Earth.

It almost brought pain to my ears, but I survived the ordeal, and after the plane landed at the airport in Juarez, I stepped foot on Mexican territory.

It was large, and I did not know where to start.

The evening sun was setting, so I decided to cool off at a club that held great prospects.

There, I sat inside the club, on a seat near a counter, as I took in some shots. I had surveyed the place and noticed that it was divided into two separate parts. The VIP section and the common section, which I sat in,

As I kept pondering on my next line of action, which would be to locate the field, I felt a tap on my back, followed by a voice that sounded too familiar.

“Rahul, my friend!”

I turned and was greeted by an ever-familiar face: “Fucking bastard! Gabriel, is that you?”

“It is I, in flesh and blood.”

“From MIT, and look, I never knew I would find you here. The possibility was one in one thousand.”

“I’m that one,” he said. “You’re a traveler now?”

“No, no, it’s nothing. I just passed.”

“You have to tell me, my friend.”

“You don’t have to know for now; it’s personal.”

“But I can be of help.”

“Just let it go, Gabriel!”

“That was rather unwelcoming. I’m sorry,” I apologized.

“It’s okay,” he said.

“It’s just saying I could be of help because I know every single place in the city. I’ve been here for two weeks and toured everywhere.”

“Did you say you know everywhere?”

“Yes,” he said, beating his hand on the counter. “And I also have an inn you can stay at. I’ve been needing company, and you don’t

have to worry. I've already paid. Would save you costs."

"Agreed"

"Marvelous!" Gabriel cheered with a smile on his face.

I went ahead to narrate my ordeal to Gabriel without leaving any stone unturned.

"You need not worry. Tomorrow, your field. First, you need to rest, and the streets aren't too friendly at night. The people are beginning to troop in."

I turned and noticed the club was getting more filled up.

"We should go."

The both of us, now bonded together by fate, went out of the club and located Gabriel's place of temporary residence.

"Make yourself feel at home, my friend."

And so I did. I lay in the room while Gabriel watched some movies on television. There, I dozed off with hopeful thoughts.

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Chapter 6

The next morning came, along with the sun. We were up and ready by the 9-hour mark.

I had dressed up in a grey suit and a black turtleneck, along with a pair of white Air Force sneakers, while Gabriel, who had sworn to never put on a suit in his life, opted for his very casual white long-sleeve, a pair of combat boots, and a grey combat pant to match. He laughed at a joke that said I looked like one of those new-to-the-game Mafia bosses who controlled a section in Ciudad.

We sat in the small living room, which housed just two sofas and a small center table. There, we were having breakfast, which Gabriel had hustled for them on the streets to fuel us ahead of the day's job.

"How long have you been here?" I asked again.

"Well, honestly, two weeks."

"And how long do you intend on staying here?"

"Three actually. I thought those three weeks would be boring, but then you came along."

"That does not mean... Anyway, when do we go to the field?"

"About that—"

"What's about that?"

"I do not know where the field is."

“You don’t know what?” I shot.

“Calm down, Rahul, calm down. I don’t know where it is, but I know a guy who knows everywhere in this place. What I do know is that the field is in one of those evil places.”

“So, this guy—where do we find him?”

“At the bar, in the VIP section. His name is Rico.”

I relaxed and ate slowly. “Why didn’t you say this?”

“I’m sorry, I just thought that if I told you there and then, that would be the last time I see you again.”

“Need I say that you might be jeopardizing someone’s life with this single act?”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Well, eat up quickly. Let go. Is he there now?”

“He is always there. That’s like his second place.”

“So how do we get in?”

“How much do you have with you?”

“A lot”

“That’s more than enough, then.”

Gabriel ate his oatmeal breakfast quickly. This soiled his mouth as he went in to wash it.

I sat and observed him. For some reason, I was extremely excited. I could not pinpoint why, but I knew it had something to do with the VIP section.

After the breakfast was done, we walked out of our room and down the stairs.

I dropped some Dirhams on the counter and stared at the receptionist, a young boy, who stared back suspiciously.

“It’s equivalent, if not more,” Gabriel said in probably the worst Spanish I had ever heard.

The receptionist, who was new, as opposed to the girl we had met last night, took the money and placed it under the counter with an affirmative nod.

“We,” I pointed to myself and Gabriel, “will be back.” I cupped his palm from behind and threw them forward. “Here,” he pointed to the ground, “understand?”

“I understand English, sir,” the young man said calmly as he stared wide-eyed.

That completely destroyed half of my self-esteem. As I said, “Oh,” I gave a subtle nod and turned around to leave.

“That was embarrassing,” Gabriel muttered the moment we stepped out of the door.

“Agreed”

We stepped out into the almost dry streets of Ciudad. It was unlike Dubai, with visible electric poles around.

“Old ways of sharing electricity, but still having a ninety percent rate of power. I must say, I am impressed.” I marveled.

“Of course. Same thing I thought when I arrived here. But then I heard that Ciudad was being evacuated little by little.”

We passed some aesthetically designed houses with nice fences but overgrown grassy lawns.

“These houses were put up for sale, but when no one wanted to buy them, they were abandoned. Now, the only thing happening here is boys who have formed petty gangs lurking in them. It’s really sad.”

“Definitely, a person who still stays here has agreed to adapt to life. I’m a thrill seeker, but I wouldn’t put my life in danger or at the expense of being manhandled by hooligans.”

As we walked through the dusty streets, littered sparsely with wrappers of junk food, eyes fell on us from all corners. Mostly on me, because I looked alien in their land.

It took us about a hundred stares, four turns, and the crossing of an almost empty road to reach the club.

It was less populated than the night before, obviously because the best part of the day started at night.

We walked past the bouncers at the front door and let the door fall back behind us. The lights were off, but the VIP section, which was at the far-right corner, was red-lit and still boomed with Mexican rap sounds. It never slept.

“He’s in there, right?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go then!”

“Sure, sure, there’s no need to rush. We are already here.”

We walked towards the door but were blocked by the huge men who stood as a barrier between us and our promised land. They wore thick black clothes, grip gloves, high boots, a jacket, and some glasses that were also black.

I could trace some vests hidden in their clothes and knew that they were always prepared for any kind of shooting because it was regular to them.

They did not pay attention to us and looked straight over our heads.

I took out a stick of cigarettes and lit it. I took in a mouthful of smoke, which turned to ash, a part of the cigarette. I then released it on the guard's bodies.

Gabriel's eyes went wide, as he expected us to be pounded upon at the end of the day, but then I reached out of my bag and took out a huge amount of money, bundled in two places, and placed in each of the guards' hands.

They looked at the money, then at themselves, then gave each other a silent nod and parted.

"Marvelous," Gabriel said as they walked into the booming room.

The sound was deafening. Communication by simply talking would have proved futile. It took every ounce of energy one had to shout to communicate with someone just a meter or two away.

"That's where Rico is?" I pointed at a group of men dressed in authentic suits and surrounded by a bunch of naked women who sat near the counter of the VIP section. There, a boy stood and cleaned up his glasses.

"Yes! He's there. I see him."

"Let's go!"

I walked towards them and sat on a free seat on their table. The men kept a shocked expression as they watched me keep my small briefcase on the table. They were surprised at my audacity. This also brought many eyes to their table, as others around them began to murmur.

"Who is this guy?" They whispered to themselves in Spanish.

"I want to speak with Rico," I shouted through the high sounds. "I have a business to discuss with him."

Just then, Gabriel grabbed me and yanked me and my briefcase off the table.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. He didn't mean that," he pleaded to the men.

"What are you doing? We have to speak with Rico. Time is ticking," I said as I tried to break free.

"We are going to talk to Rico. Next time, let me lead." He dragged me to the counter and made me sit.

"This is Rico," Gabriel pointed at the young boy of twenty-two who stood behind the counter. He was tall and skinny, with scanty facial hair but large jet-black hair on his head, which fell to the sides.

I was stupefied. I looked at Rico, then back at the men who still kept an eye on me, then at Gabriel. "You know, I actually thought Rico was one of the men that was seated, not the young man here who served. In my defense, the way you described him, he looked fierce."

"Exactly my first impression of him."

I turned to Rico, who had watched us converse together like he was never there.

"Rico! How are you?"

"You finally get into the VIP section after many failed trials. I saw you when you tried to talk to Angelica. Completely letting your friend get into trouble. How many times do you have to realize that you will never get her?"

I knew something had made him excited earlier this morning, and I had found out. I however kept silent on the subject because I concluded as I sat there that it was a win-win for the both of us. I helped him enter the VIP section, and Gabriel in turn helped me gain an audience with Rico.

As we continued to hit cats and dogs over their topic, Gabriel looked around the room. There were five strip poles. Four at each

corner of the room, and one right in the middle. Each pole had an exotic dancer, unclad, running their cracks on the poles. They would twirl at the audience, who laughed due to their fascination and excitement. The men would use currencies to slap their ass cheeks, while the ladies would feel their bodies.

The men who I had mistakenly sat with still kept their eyes on me, irrespective of the women who twirled around them and giggled. One who I could discern as their leader was more fixated on me. He had a finely chiseled face and long hair, which, like Rico, fell to the side. His jaw was free of facial hair, and he was more relaxed in his position. His shoulders were cushioned at the top of the sofa they sat on, and by each of his sides, a girl sat comfortably in.

I made eye contact with him, kept it, then turned away. I knew that would not be the last time we would see each other. Drawing an enemy in the situation I was in was not what I had wanted to begin with.

“Well, that is, by the way. I brought someone to meet you,” Gabriel finally said as he turned the conversation to what brought them there.

“My friend wants to get to the field on the deep side of Ciudad, and we need your help with direction.”

“You have the money to pay?”

“Of course he has, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“What business do you have with that area anyway?” Rico asked as he picked up a glass cup and began to wipe it with a clean white napkin.

“That should not be a business to you. We have ours to settle, and then we can go back to being strangers. In business, you don’t spill what doesn’t concern you.” I replied.

Rico smiled. "That's true, Rico; he's a smart one, unlike you. You, my friend, are a chatterbox."

"Just give us the direction."

"I would have to go with you, and that means more money to give. Because they don't take it kindly with new faces there."

"Agreed, name your price."

"Twenty thousand Mexican pesos"

"Agreed, can we go now?"

"I need to get a person who will sit in for me. Give me five minutes."

Rico went in. It took about fifteen minutes for him to prepare. When he came out, he was out of his bartender clothes and into casual wear with a gray jacket over it. Another guy walked in to take over his place.

As he walked out, the leader of the men who sat near him spoke out,

"Rico! You're going somewhere?"

"Yes brother"

"Well, I wanted you to give my friends there a bottle or two."

"Thank you for your gesture, but we are in a rush," I smiled.

"Oh my," the man said, keeping his hand on his chest. "I'm sorry, I did not know. I wish you good luck!" He proceeded and raised his glass.

I kept my hands together and bowed, then followed Rico in leaving, with Gabriel behind him.

The man whispered something to one of his men who sat behind him. And after Gabriel had passed the door, the man who was whispered to stood up and walked out through the back door.

“So, the field, a place where young people who played together, grew up, turned to the gang, and killed each other, It’s one of those things. It’s crazy how that place interests a foreigner.”

“I’m a journalist,” I responded sarcastically.

“I’ll take that as a joke.” Rico laughed and reached out to the collar of the jacket and relaxed it.

As we walked, he reacted to people who sat on old balconies or leaned at the corners of street walls.

“You seem popular around here.”

“Of course. That is why you should work with me. A couple of those men we passed would have kept you in a tight corner if I weren’t around.”

“I can handle a gun and my fist well; do not underestimate me.”

“You don’t look too old, and I never judge a book by its cover.”

“That is excellent of you.”

Gabriel walked silently behind us. He did not pay much attention but stayed close due to his fear of being manhandled in the silent streets we walked by.

“When does the violence happen, though?” He finally said, “The streets are too quiet.”

“Oh, it happens much of a spontaneous nature. I could bet that at least one of the streets we just passed has gotten one form of violence already.”

“Can we move faster?”

“Sure, let’s take this shortcut.”

We passed through a corridor that was fenced on each side by wooden planks. It was of long length, as we walked tirelessly on

the littered floor. The dirt had been buried by the sand, dust, and water, which dried up there.

A while later, we came out in the open of a street. Across the street were a large, leveled surface with stands to their left and a group of houses to their right. It was a football pitch, and it had a lot of people still playing football in groups.

It had a net fence that surrounded it, but in some places, it had been cut open.

“This is the field you seek,” he said, spreading his arm wide like an eagle.

“How do I pay you your money? I have dirhams, but I would give you twenty thousand dirhams, even though I know that it would be more than the amount we agreed in Mexican pesos.”

“Sure, I’ll take it.”

“Let’s find a place that is shielded away. I noticed a few steps behind us as we walked.

“Oh, you noticed that too? I guess it’s my brother who sent them. Not to worry, I’ll talk to them and tell them you are of no harm.”

“That would be very helpful.”

We walked to an abandoned shed, and we exchanged the cash, which Rico quickly threw into the small cross bag he held.

“I’ll leave you guys to do your thing.”

“Sure, thank you.”

We all went out of the shed, and Rico parted ways with us. We went in the direction from which we came. This left me and Gabriel as sheep in a land of wolves.

“Very well then; let’s go make our findings.”

I led the way, as my eyes were set on the houses to my left. They were old and made of bricks with glass windows. The dull red paint was very prominent among the buildings, and wires were jumbled up on a single pole and shot into the different buildings.

We crossed the road and approached the first building.

“So, what are we looking for here?”

From my case, I took out my phone, plugged in the earpiece, and began to play the voice note Maya had sent. I gave it to Gabriel, who began to listen attentively. “Listen to this; it will help you and distract you a bit. Don’t think like yourself; think like an investigator or detective.”

“Okay, okay, I hear you, sir.”

Gabriel listened to the voice note as it played, while I began to pay distinctive attention to the buildings and the floor on which I walked.

There were five buildings in the area. The middle building was a large shop, where toiletries and just about anything were sold.

I would walk, trace my steps backward, and then stand to hear the shouts of the people who played football on the field. I noticed that one of the buildings had a window that was broken. It was the ground-floor window of the third building. I looked at the ground and noticed that there were pieces of broken glass on the floor. I stopped there and examined the building.

I remembered vividly that at the end of the voice note, there had been a loud sound of shattering glass. I stood up, looked through the window, and saw more pieces of glass. It was a single room.

I gave a nod and proceeded to check another building. I fixed my eyes on them and figured that the building’s windows were all fixed.

I examined the last one from the outside and figured that I had gotten what I wanted.

“Look, Rahul, I’ve listened to this repeatedly, and I have no idea what you want me to pick out of this. I do not understand those beeping sounds. But I do know that the man behind the door in that voice note sounded very familiar. I’ve heard it somewhere before.

“Exactly. Come with me.”

I turned around and walked back to the fourth building.

There, I looked up at the window. Then, I kept my bag on the right. This is what I did to kill two birds with one stone. I used this opportunity to scout around and noticed that about four people who stood at designated points were staring at us intently and moving casually around. Gabriel, who had not noticed, continued to blabber.

I took out my magnifying glass from my case and looked at the lines that were used as designs on the pavers. With a magnifying glass, I could pick out some specks of reflection.

“Glass!” he marveled.

“What do you mean?”

“This is the house,” I said in a low tone. In front of them were some flowers. I looked behind the flower and found pieces of a shattered phone. I picked it up and studied it.

“This is definitely the house. A Motorola. This is it.”

“How did you know this was the house?”

I put the magnifying glass back into my case, zipped it, and stood up. “Follow me”

We walked into the house. From the corner of my eye, I could see the men advancing toward the house too.

We met an elderly woman at the counter. She was knitting while she looked at the television.

“Good morning, Mama. I want to book a room, please.”

“Upstairs or downstairs”

“Upstairs.”

“Okay, take the key, get comfortable, and I will come up to get money later.”

“Thank you,” I grabbed the keys, and the two of them went upstairs.

“Tell me”

“I noticed first that the people here don’t really enjoy the leisure of cleaning, except when they want to completely change an item. It was easy to discern. The windows all had dusty looks. But this one, this particular one, was clean. Too clean to be left unchecked. So, I went to the ground with my magnifying glass and found tiny specs of glass that found their way to the insides of those lines that a broom couldn’t touch. And then, the shattered phone there was more like the icing on the cake.”

“So, what are we looking for here?”

“A clue, maybe. And I wanted to be sure Maya was real.”

I opened the door and walked in. The first place I went was to the window. I also found specks of broken glass around it.

“Are we going to stay here?”

Quick steps were heard from outside.

“Oh no, we won’t. Besides, we should be having company anytime soon.”

“Those steps too; I heard them in the voice note.”

Just as he said, we heard rapid footsteps approach.

“Now do you believe me? Quick, let’s slant the fridge across the door,” I said to him.

“Who are they?” Gabriel asked as we took down the fridge and slanted the door. As we did that, the door banged.

“By my conclusion, they are the people who were after Maya.”

“How long did you notice they were on us?”

“Since Rico left,”

“Open the door!” the voice said.

“I heard this voice in the voice note. It wasn’t the main voice, but it was in the background.”

“Exactly.”

“How do we escape?”

“The same way Maya escaped.”

“The window?”

“The door”

Just then, more pressure was applied to the door. Then came shots through. The bullets punctured the door and hit some appliances in the room.

“Oh my God, we’re going to die,” Gabriel screamed with his palms at the side of his ear as they both fell to the ground.

“Come on quick!”

The men stood. I led the way and jumped through the window.

I landed on the ground, much to the surprise of some passersby.

I grunted at the pain as I stopped and dusted my jacket. I swung my hand as I felt I must have cracked my elbow.

“Come on!” I shouted at Gabriel, who stood at the window and calculated the height. He was definitely scared to his bones.

“I’m scared!”

“I don’t mean to be sexist, but you’re a man. You can do it. Man up”

Just then, the door swung open. That was enough to tell Gabriel to jump.

He leaped through the window and landed on the floor.

I helped pick him up.

“We don’t have time; let’s go.”

Three men shot at them from the window as we fled. “There’s one remaining.”

“One of who?”

“Bend down!” I screamed at Gabriel, who followed my instructions almost simultaneously.

The fourth one had exited the house and appeared right in front of us to pull the trigger.

As he was about to pull the trigger, I and Gabriel went down. The bullet zipped past us and hit a trash can behind us. As quickly as he had shot the bullet, I dove under him and performed an uppercut straight to his chin. This sent the man flying. His gun dropped to the floor. I picked it up and fled, with Gabriel right behind me.

This incident had caused commotion around as people began to run in different directions.

“We need to hijack that bike, sadly. Can you ride a bike?”

“Of course, I can.”

They stopped a bike that was about to get past us.

Gabriel took his passport out of his pocket and showed it to the man.

“Inspector Gabriel and his assistant We need your bike to escape the clutches of unknown gunmen.”

The man spoke in Spanish.

“I don’t know what you mean, sir, but we don’t have time.”

He shoved the man off the bike and jumped on it.

“I’m really sorry,” I apologized as we zoomed away. The man who had the bike could only raise his hands in confusion.

As we zoomed past, the four men went into a car and pursued us.

“You know the cathedral, yes? The large one.”

“Yes. I worshipped there during my first week.”

“That is where Maya wants us to go. I guess she has someone there.”

The rush of the car chase was electrifying. The men shot at us as they chased.

At one point, I knew Gabriel was going in circles.

“You don’t know where you are going, do you?”

“I really don’t. I’ve never been here.”

“Follow the corridor. That one we used.”

We drove back to the field and used the corridor. Then the men stopped the car there and took another route.

“I think we lost them.”

“You can’t possibly lose someone in your own neighborhood. Just keep being focused. We need to get there now.”

“Sure, let’s go.”

The wind beat against our faces as we drove through. At intervals, Gabriel would turn his grip on the handle of the bike to accelerate it.

Just when we had come face to face with the cathedral, the men pulled up in front of us and came down from the car.

They each brought out a gun and walked towards us. Gabriel, who had held his brakes, turned around to drive, but a bullet punctured the tire and sent us to the floor.

“This way!” Gabriel said and ran towards a restaurant. “This place has a backdoor, which would take us straight to the street across the church.”

“We have to escape them first,” I screamed.

“Let’s just get to the church. They can’t shoot there.”

“Let’s go”

We pushed open the door and ran through the customers who were having a good time. The men came in and shot three bullets at the ceiling.

“Everybody to the ground!”

Screams flew to the ceilings as they went down.

Gabriel and I used that commotion to slip through the backdoor. As we slipped through, one of the men caught sight of us and pursued us.

The two of us ran through the kitchen and past the changing room. Then, we opened a door and saw the church just across the road. The men who chased us were still hot on our tails. We knew this and wasted no time. We ran through the road without waiting for the traffic to light up in our favor. This caused more commotion as cars blared their horns.

We ran past the gate of the church after escaping several near-accident moments and sped through to the front door. The men still carried on with the chase.

I and Gabriel slipped through the door and into a corridor.

They were having a mass in the church. Just as we were about to go into the service, we were both pulled into the confession box by two men who tightly held us by our lips.

Gabriel tried to break free. His eyes bulged out of their sockets.

“Shhh, we are trying to help you. We knew you were coming, Mr. Rahul. Is this man your apprentice or one of them?”

“He’s my friend; he helped me find this place,” I said frantically.

“Okay then. Stay quiet”

Through the holes in the confession box, we could see the men walk past and go into the service.

“Wait here,” one of the men who held us, dressed in a priest uniform, walked out.

He met the four men and directed them to a far corner of the service to sit.

The other one, who was with us, sneaked us outside.

“Follow me,” he said.

“What about your colleague?” Gabriel asked.

“He will join us.”

“Who are you?” I inquired, my mind calculating.

“I am friends with Maya. She was here a day ago but has since left. Where did she leave to?”

“I don’t know yet.”

We walked silently and passed through a courtyard in the church vicinity. Then, we walked down a stone staircase and went into an underground layer.

I took out my torch and handed it over to the man as he led the way.

We got to a door, and he knocked.

“Who are your three best detectives, in sequence?”

There was silence among the three men.

“Wait, was that question for me?” I asked.

“Of course. That is your question. You are the one who needs to go through the door, and the passcode is this.”

“In sequence, Sherlock Holmes, Robert Langdon, and...” He looked at the man to his left, whom he later knew as Javier, then at Gabriel. He sighed, then said, “Bruce Wayne.”

“No, no, no. Batman?” Gabriel cried out.

The sound of bolts being unblocked went up, and the door opened. An elderly priest was inside the small room that housed just four chairs and a table. Candles were lit on the wall.

“Yes, Bruce Wayne is a master detective. He’s not only a superhero.” The priest who welcomed them said:

“Thank you, Your Holiness,” I bowed.

“Bless you.

“Please sit; we don’t have much time.”

Just then, the priest who had distracted their chasers came in. “Priest Alphonso, you may sit.”

The three priests each took a seat around the table, and myself. Gabriel was left to stand.

“Maya was in trouble,” the elderly priest began. “She came to us for help. Here, she kept a piece of information for you.”

Javier handed over an envelope to me.

“Don’t open it now, however. It tells you where you would find her.”

“So, you have no idea where she has gone?”

“No, not at all. But she has already left. Things would have been better if you had come earlier. Carlos is looking for her, and you are also on his radar. He has eyes everywhere, so when you find out where the location is, you need to get out of this place.”

“We will. Is that all?”

“Yes, that is all.”

“We passed through all that, just to solve another mystery?”

“Of course,”

“Let’s go then.”

“Javier, please escort them out.”

Javier took the two of us out and placed us in a taxi to a hotel that had already been booked for us by the priests, under Maya’s pleas.

After we had lodged comfortably, I opened the letters.

“These are just numbers. 48.8584 and 2.2945. I think there is a secret word written somewhere. This is the texture of paper for that.”

“I’m a traveler. I have my way with numbers. Give it to me.”

“Wait, wait.”

He took a lighter out of his bag and lit it underneath the paper.

It read, “Cum moriuntur amantes adeunt huc. Oh crap, the numbers are cleaned off; do you still remember them?”

“I love numbers; it’s in my head.”

“48.8584 and 2.2945”

We wrote it down on a piece of paper.

“What does that language mean?”

“It’s old Latin; it means when lovers die, they go here.”

Gabriel studied the paper for moments before it struck him.

“Good lord, bless the almighty; I’ve figured it out! Fuck! That was smart.”

“What is it?”

“I knew I had seen these numbers before. That is longitude and latitude. And that place is the best place you could find lovers.”

“Where?”

“Pack your bags, my friend. You’re going to Paris.”

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Chapter 7

The journey to Paris happened as fast as I could make it happen. Leaving Mexico was something I had wanted to achieve faster, so I wasn't going to miss Maya anymore, which I successfully did. Immediately, we figured out the next location. We made our next stop at the airport, where we successfully bought ourselves tickets.

Gabriel had said he was ready to follow me around the world if he had to. At that point, leaving him alone there in Mexico was only endangering his life. Our journey to the airport was safe, as I couldn't spot anyone tailing us.

Getting to the airport, we did all the transactions needed, and since the sun had set already and the flight was scheduled to happen the day after, we had to lodge in a nearby hotel. Over the night, I was wide awake most of the time, pondering the events of the last few days.

It almost seemed surreal that I was now in Mexico, looking for the girl I had only texted on Tinder. I was quite sure half of the world would send insults my way if they were told what I was doing at the moment.

"Why the hell am I even here?" I asked myself loud enough for anyone around me to hear. Gabriel was long gone into the dreamland, so he couldn't have heard me.

Maya

The name echoed in my head. I was deeply lusting after her, and I knew my body wouldn't cave until I had met her and had my

way with her. Apart from anything else, the journey provided me with thrilling experiences. There were a lot of past events in my life that I had decided to lock up in a vault in my head and never reopen again.

Though I wasn't willing to explore them any longer, I was going to use the skills that I had learned back then. Finally, I was able to fall into a slumber a few hours before sunrise. I wouldn't have made it to the airport in time if not for Gabriel, who saved me from the bondage of sleep.

We were now in Paris after approximately eleven hours. Walking out of the airport was a sight to marvel at. Since I had lived in Dubai in recent years, I let Gabriel do all the marveling for me.

"You've never been to Paris before?" I asked.

"Have you?" shot back Gabriel.

"Well, I've seen better cities."

"It doesn't matter," finalized Gabriel, trying to stop me from continuing the conversation.

I pushed my hand into my pocket and removed my phone, keeping my briefcase and passport in one hand. I opened my phone to check the time, and even the setting sun confirmed that it was evening. Just past six p.m.

The sun's golden air filled the city, leaving no corner untouched. The front of the airport was occupied by so many passersby, accompanied by an unceasing chatter in French. Looking up at the buildings close by, they were big and magnificent, almost comparable to those in Dubai.

I turned to face Gabriel, and I was shocked by how we were both dressed. We weren't in tattered clothes, but we were not in great clothes either. I also didn't want to meet Maya in the kind of outfit I was wearing.

“So, where to?” asked Gabriel without looking down at me.

“Let’s get into a cab first. Do you speak French??”

“I don’t. I’m sure we can find those who speak English.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

We moved closer to the road, hoping to catch a cab. As we motioned closer to the road, we were pushed by some of the pedestrians and travelers who seemed to be rushing to their respective homes. After waiting at the roadside for a minute, listening to the busy traffic that consisted of the hooting of the horns and purring of the engines of the luxurious cars, we were finally able to board a black taxi.

As fate would have it, the man could speak English even though the French accent in his tone was very strong.

“Take us to the shopping mall closest to the Eiffel Tower, please,” said Gabriel as I closed the door.

“No luggage?” asked the driver as he peered at us. We exchanged glances, and that was when we remembered that we were in front of the airport.

I quickly nodded and said, “Oh! No, we don’t have any.”

“D’accord, messieurs,” said the driver as he stepped on the gas.

The driver was young, and I could tell from his voice and the way he drove his car. Initially, if not for the taxi sign that was placed on the roof of the car, you would never have assumed the Toyota Avalon, 2016 model, was a taxi.

When he turned around to look at us, he appeared to be a decent man with a nice brown coat and a white top. He had facial hair that was well tended to, and it was obvious he was a lady’s man. With the way he handled the gear, I could guess he had previously had a career in driving.

“Did you ever compete in a car race competition?” I inquired without even meaning to.

I caught the change of demeanor in his face, and something told me he was still a racer.

“Rahul!” exclaimed Gabriel. “You still brought your detective skills to Paris, eh? I’m so sorry, sir. He’s always poking his nose into things he shouldn’t.”

“First off, I’m not a sir,” began the driver. “I’m still twenty-one, and I’m pretty sure you both are older than I am. Secondly, it’s actually okay. I am indeed a racer, and the only thing you’ve missed, sir, is that.”

“You still race?”

“Oh wow. You’re indeed a... uhm,” the driver hesitated due to his inability to speak English fluently.

“Great?”

“Bien. Great detective, sir,” completed the driver.

“This is unbelievable. You’ve got to teach me how you do all these things,” said Gabriel, completely stunned that my assumptions were actually right.

“Watch Holmes do it more often, and you might just get the hang of it.”

The air in the car grew quiet, while the driver had decided to show off some of his skills by swerving at corners and overtaking cars that moved slowly. After a while, the driver parked in front of a boutique and announced that we had arrived.

“I didn’t get your name?” asked I, just after Gabriel had stepped out of the car.

“Je m’appelle Mathis,” answered Mathis.

“Mathis, would you like to be hired to drive us around throughout our stay in Paris?”

“Uhm, I don’t think so.” Mathis was trying to refuse the offer when I withdrew a bunch of Dirhams from my suitcase. His jaw dropped in surprise, and he swallowed hard as he slowly snapped out of it.

“You’ll have to pay more, ehm... argent,” said Mathis.

“No preblemo,” said I, with a grin on my face.

Mathis rubbed his chin slowly as he weighed his options. He looked around as though he were checking if anyone was watching before reaching into my palm to take the money.

“Alright then. We’ll be going in there to change, and we’ll be coming back really quick. If I don’t meet you here, I’ll assume you’ve changed your mind,” I explained before I finally stepped out of the car. I was very certain that Mathis was going to stick around and accept the offer because he needed the money. I wasn’t exactly sure how he would use the money, but I was pretty sure he needed it.

Gabriel had gone ahead of me into the boutique to get what he was going to change into. The attendant behind the counter greeted me in French, which I responded to in English, but I didn’t stick around to see the change in her facial expression when she figured I couldn’t speak French. I found Gabriel at the back of the boutique, shopping for a pair of jeans, and I joined him.

When we were done shopping, we went into the closet provided to change into the clothes we picked. I used that opportunity to check my phone with the very hopeful expectation that there was a message from Maya. Just as I stared at the screen of my phone, I could see the two missed calls that had registered themselves on my screen. The caller was Hridya, and even though I hesitated at

the sight of the notifications, I breathed out deeply and swiped the notifications off my screen.

Doing that was like stabbing myself with a knife, but I just couldn't talk to her at that moment. Whatever she said was just going to derail and delay me from meeting up with Maya. I opened my Tinder app and then went straight to our chat box. The last sight told me she was online about nineteen minutes ago, and that almost made me curse myself for not checking earlier.

I wondered why she didn't drop any messages for me, but I was interrupted by Gabriel, who called for me to move faster.

"I'm coming!" I exclaimed in response. Rapidly, I typed a message that said, "Romeo is almost there. He hopes Juliet is still waiting."

Without wasting any more time, I undressed myself and quickly slipped into the clothes that I had picked. I also changed my shoes and then moved out of the closet to show Gabriel the outfit that I had chosen.

Gabriel was in a completely new outfit. He had a gray top and black jeans that were complimented by a black runner shoe. I easily guessed that, since the weather in Paris was relatively cold, he also had on a long black jacket. He stood in front of the wall mirror, checking himself as I walked closer to him.

"You've decided to pay for your outfit yourself, right?" I asked, a smirk littering my face.

"Oh, I've got a very great friend who would gladly bail me out," answered Gabriel with a chuckle. "You've got a pretty nice style too."

At the words of Gabriel, I couldn't keep the blood that flowed into my cheek back, causing my cheek to redden. I was dressed in black pants, a white long-sleeved shirt, and a brown inner

jacket. I had also gone for a chocolate-colored Chelsea boot, as it complimented my jacket.

“Add this,” said Gabriel, as he tossed me a long jacket, just like his. Putting it on, I couldn’t disagree with the beauty that I was now transformed into. I really couldn’t remember the last time I had dressed that well, and, strangely, it felt good to be in cozy and comfortable clothes of great quality. We walked to the counter after I had picked up a wristwatch and an office bag, paid for the things we bought, and then walked out of the boutique with a resounding “Mercy beaucoup” from the attendant.

On getting out, though the sun could no longer be sighted, the city was still illuminated by its light, and the city was still vibrant. Right in front of the boutique was the black Toyota Avalon that had driven us to the location.

“Is there something I do not know?” asked Gabriel as he looked over at Mathis and me simultaneously. Mathis was out of his car, standing close to it, waiting patiently for us.

“Mathis here,” I began to explain, placing my hands on his shoulder, “is going to be our chauffeur for the day.”

“Ooh! That’s nice,” said Gabriel, with a broad smile.

“Shall we?” asked Mathis as he opened the back door, gesturing for us to get in.

I was about to leave when I saw a sign on the other side of the street. The sign was written in French, and I couldn’t tell what it was. However, I had the strongest feeling that it was just what I was looking for.

“What does it read, Mathis?” I asked as I pointed at the sign.

“Money changer. Why?”

“Great. Stay here; I’ll be right back,” I commanded.

I walked briskly, crossing the road and disappearing into the shop. After a couple of minutes, I walked out with only the new office bag that I had bought and got into the front passenger's seat.

After wearing my seat belt, I said, "Let's go."

"What happened in there?" asked Gabriel, who had been waiting for me impatiently. The worry in his eyes was written with bold ink.

"I went to get some dollars. At least, that would reduce the rate at which our presence is noted."

"True. Nice idea," affirmed Gabriel.

"So, where to? La tour Eiffel?" asked Mathis.

"If that's the Eiffel Tower, then sure, take us there," answered me with a chuckle.

After a few minutes of a silent drive, Mathis decided to break the silence.

"So, what are you doing here with so much, uh, money? I'm pretty sure you're not here for, uh, a honeymoon or anything of the sort," asked Mathis. It was obvious that his interest in whatever business we were in Paris for was at its peak already.

I was glad Gabriel didn't say anything, as he glanced at me and sat back down in his comfy leather chair. I gave it a little thought, and Maya's pictures flashed before my eyes. Slowly, a smile crept onto my face, and from underneath my breath, I murmured the words, "To save love."

Just before the words escaped my throat, I had a clear picture of the meaning of the words in my head, but at that point, there was another picture that vaguely appeared in my head. It was a picture I couldn't shake away. It was a picture of my ex-wife,

Hridya, holding onto our daughter, Diya.

My heart sank in despair as the thought of my broken family filled my head, and I dropped my head in worry. I was in this state for an extra few minutes before the rapid calling of my name quietly crept into my heart. The calling gradually became audible and, at a point, so sharp that I jerked back in my seat.

“Rahul! “Are you all right, Rahul?” I asked Gabriel, leaning forward from the back of the car and shaking me roughly.

“I am. I guess I was just deep in thought.”

“Oh no. I think you’ve drowned in your thoughts already,” joked Gabriel.

„We’re here, sir,” said Mathis.

It was at that point that I realized that the car had actually parked very close to the tower. I quickly rushed out of the car and then took in the cold air of Paris. The air was filled with so much noise, coming from the sound of cars and the chattering of pedestrians crossing. It wouldn’t have been too disturbing if they spoke in a known language. I rested an arm on the car and stared at the massive construction of the Eiffel Tower, regarded with so much prestige.

Looking back, I could see the statue of a man and a horse that was built close to the Eiffel Tower. The Pont d’Iena

“A beautiful city for love indeed,” said Gabriel as he stepped out of the car and walked towards a snack bar, just right by our side.

“Wait here,” I said to Mathis as I dropped my bag in the car and followed Gabriel.

“I’m guessing it will be more colorful as soon as it gets dark enough.”

“Yeah right!”

After we got two bags of chips from the small kiosk, we walked back to the car, rested on the front of the bonnet, and watched the people who passed by.

“So, what now, Detective Rahul?” inquired Gabriel as he munched on the chips in his hand.

I stared into the distance and let the loud chattering all around me overwhelm me. Then, after allowing the question asked to get carried away by the wind, I decided to give my sincerest response.

“Honestly, I do not have any idea, but I’ll say we walk around and see what comes of it. Sounds good?”

“Sounds like a plan,” agreed Gabriel, as we both got out of the vehicle and walked through the crowd that had gathered. Gradually, we made our way past the road, and then we got directly under the Eiffel Tower.

It was a busy center as there were so many people around, most of them taking pictures, while others just admired each other. Studying the groups of people around me, I could easily estimate that four out of ten groups were couples, and the next four were groups of friends. One was the group of singles, while the last one was the paparazzi. There was the sound of a shutter clicking from the right and left and so much loud chattering in the background.

“Do you see her yet?” asked Gabriel, and I shook my head. There were Latina ladies present, but I was pretty sure none of them were hers. We kept looking and then slowly walked away from under the Eiffel Tower to a green grass area where many people had settled down on a picnic, not even remarking that it was getting dark. I glanced at my watch, and I was stunned by how fast time flies. The time was exactly ten minutes to nine.

After a few more minutes of looking around, my ears suddenly picked up a Russian voice. I stopped walking and then held Gabriel by the hand to hinder him from moving too. I needed to know where the voice came from. It was perfectly normal to catch someone speaking Russian in Paris, but for me, it caused me to take a few steps back and confirm if I wasn't being followed.

"Why did you?" Gabriel was still saying this when I shoved my bags of chips into his hands. He was puzzled at this action, but all he could say was, "Thank you?" and then he kept walking.

With that single gesture, I had caused all the men who were tailing me to blow their covers. I was pretty confident that I had spotted them all, and Gabriel was still walking in front of me innocently, crushing the chips in his mouth passionately.

Suddenly, I heard someone calling out to me, "Monsieur."

I turned slightly to see who called me, and I was puzzled to see a man with a camera in his hand. I knew it was definitely a cameraman as he rushed towards me as though he had been searching for me all this time. I stopped and turned, and Gabriel followed suit as the man closed in on us. He was obviously an average Frenchman who used the camera in his hand to make a living.

"You're Rahul?" asked the man as he got closer, trying to steady his breathing. After exchanging glances with Gabriel, I nodded my head in response.

"Great. So, I would love to take a couple of pictures for you," said the cameraman.

At that point, I began to process my thoughts. A few seconds ago, I spotted some men in the crowd who were tailing me and had planted themselves in strategic areas to ensure that I didn't escape. I had counted eight of them in the shortest time I could. Of course, they had no idea their cover had been blown, but then

the cameraman walked in and asked to take a picture of me. There were only two possible outcomes.

“Why?” inquired I.

“I was paid to. Two days ago,” answered the cameraman as he fumbled with his camera.

“By whom?” pressed Gabriel.

“A lady. She didn’t give me a name. She only said, “Take a picture,” answered the man. “She also warned me to confirm you’re really the one before doing anything else,”

The man stopped fumbling with his camera and dipped his hand into his first wallet. He seemed to not have found what he was looking for, so his hand went into his back pocket. The man was fidgeting, and the reason seemed very distant to me. Finally, he pulled out a piece of paper and read it.

“There are all the letters in the alphabet; which six are unmistakably your favorites?” the man inquired.

“Is that a trick question to see if you really love her and would choose M?” asked Gabriel.

“I’m not sure at the moment. I do think it’s a trick question.”

“I actually do have to mention seven of the alphabet; otherwise, they won’t be complete. They are E F T R A P and S. “

“Very good. You passed the trick question. She specifically said you would know the letters are meant to be seven, not six.”

As the cameraman said those words, it was right there and then that I remembered that I had mentioned to her that seven does signify perfection. Having six would make me feel incomplete until I had the seventh.

“We don’t have much time,” said the cameraman as he moved closer to us. “There’s a particular way she asked for you to pose, which is this.”

He pushed Gabriel aside and then raised one of my hands into the air, causing me to form a fist. Then, I placed the other on my waist in such a way that it formed an arc. Very quickly, the cameraman stepped back and took a picture. Light flashed into my eyes, which I wasn’t expecting.

“Hey, why did you use the flash?” asked Gabriel as he stepped closer.

“Uhm, here’s the picture,” said the cameraman, completely ignoring the question from Gabriel. “Please hold it.”

The man was obviously in a rush, as though something was constantly on his tail. As he was about to give me the picture that had been quickly printed, he stopped again and knelt on the green grass. He unzipped his bag and drew out a pen from the side. He then turned the picture around and wrote.

What if I told you to look for something new in a new place? What would you do?

I read the words in haste, and just as the man had handed over the picture to me, he bolted into the midst of the crowd, leaving both of me and Gabriel confused.

“Alright, what the hell just happened? He just came in, asked questions, took a picture—not even a picture of you with the Eiffel Tower—and said, “

“Quiet and follow me,” I said as I began to pace through the crowd. At that time, the men that I had spotted earlier and who I had kept my eyes on began to close in on us rapidly. Gabriel was fuming as he followed closely behind, but I knew that the moment the adrenaline rush that was about to get pumped into

his head flooded his entire system, he would have no reason to be upset.

There was a loud cry from behind us from a woman who had just gotten a push from one of the men who was after us. With this, I could tell that the men were now aware that their cover was blown and had decided to chase us.

“Are they after us?” said Gabriel in a rush. I was pretty confident, even though he wasn’t sure if the statement he made was a question or just an observation.

“Well, buckle your shoes because it is all about to get real.”

We were about to get off the lush green grass when two men that I had not spotted appeared in front of us. One of them was huge, while the other was of average height. We had to stop in our tracks, and just as we were about to turn back, two other Mexican men closed in on us. Immediately, I knew exactly what had to be done.

Quickly, I sprang forward and threw a punch at the muscular man, Gabriel joining me as he also lunged forward to fight the other. My fist landed right where I wanted on the face of the man, but the man only got more infuriated. He turned his head and threw his hand forward in an attempt to punch me back, but I dodged swiftly and used the opportunity to punch the man in the belly. He let out a loud grunt that drew attention to us.

The crowd around us had begun to scatter, noticing that there was already trouble at our side. In the corner of my eyes, I could see Gabriel struggling to stand his ground. He had received a couple of punches, but his assailant had also received an equal share of the punches, staggered on their feet.

My assailant rushed at me with a loud grunt and fury in his eyes. He bent over and charged at me like a bull, aiming for my waist. I adjusted my stance, placing one of my legs behind me

and bracing myself for impact. The muscular man collided with me and tried to push me backward, but I stood my ground. I raised my hand and drove my elbow into the back of the man. He screamed out in pain, dropping his hands from my waist, and I swiftly used my knee to hit the man in the head.

The man fell backward on the grass, and just before I could savor my victory against the man, two other men who were previously standing behind me grabbed me by both hands, locking me up in their grip.

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Chapter 8

I tried to struggle with them, but their grip was firm on my hands. A third man rushed forward and removed a pistol. Just as he was about to hit me in the head with the pistol, I tilted my head to dodge the blow, and with all my strength, I removed my grip from the hand of the man on my right hand and went straight for the pistol.

I successfully removed the pistol from the third man's grip, and, returning to my hand, I drove the pistol into the nose of the other man. Blood flowed rapidly from the impact, and I quickly maneuvered my way around the other two men, breaking one of their arms and hitting one in the groin. Just then, Gabriel was also successful in knocking out the one man that he had tried to fight.

As we were about to hang around, I spotted a couple of other men sprinting towards us. Just then, we began to run too, heading back to where Mathis had parked his car. Without waiting for the light to turn red, we crossed the road even with the cars moving.

We were almost hit by a bus that had refused to stop. Finally, we got to the car, only to find Mathis trying to talk to a girl.

"Let's go!" screamed Gabriel, fear gripping his heart.

"Je suis désolé. Je dois partir," said the lover boy as he dashed for the driver's door. Just as I was about to close the door of the car, there was a loud gunshot, and a bullet went through the windshield, straight past my ears, and buried itself in the back seat.

“Drive the fucking car!” screamed Gabriel, his heart in his mouth.

As if triggered by the bullet, Mathis stepped on the gas and drove recklessly into the traffic. The car graced another car on the road, but Mathis didn’t stop. He drove onto the road and began to accelerate. I and Gabriel was still trying to steady our racing hearts and uneven breath as Mathis asked the question, “Who are those guys?”

“The death that would pursue you to the end of the world if you don’t shut up and drive!” exclaimed Gabriel, completely overwhelmed in panic.

“Ignore him and just drive,” I said, trying to keep my calm.

Just then, two big blue Chevrolet pickups appeared in front of us on the wrong track, causing cars to swerve into buildings left and right.

“Oh God! “Where did they just come from?” screamed Gabriel.

“There’s a car right behind us too,” announced Mathis, and just then, a shooter from each of the three cars emerged from the windows and began to shoot at us. Screams filled the air, and the sound of bullets getting sprayed wasn’t farfetched either. Just in the nick of time when we couldn’t go forward or backward, an intersection came into view, and without wasting any time, Mathis turned hard on the wheel, causing the car to swerve with great intensity. Gabriel, who had not buckled up with the seat belt, found himself being tossed to and fro in the car. When the car finally came to a steady motion, there was no escaping the nauseating feeling of wanting to throw up so badly.

“Oh, no! Not in my car!” screamed Mathis as he clicked on the button that controlled the window at the back.

Just as Gabriel put his head out of the window and threw up, the shooting began again, and the cars we thought we had lost

turned up at our backs again, shooting as though they didn't care who got hurt.

"Oh, they're back," Gabriel shouted louder again.

Just then, the getaway drive had quickly spiraled into a car chase, and we had to find a way to lose them.

"Leave them to me. No one can threaten me in my neighborhood," said Mathis as he stepped on the gas.

My heart raced faster as fear slowly crept into my heart, but it was quickly nullified when I remembered that I had a professional driver on the wheel.

"Where do you want to go?" inquired Mathis.

"Just ditch them and get us to the hotel nearest to the airport," I answered in a rush.

The car chase hadn't gone on for more than just a minute when one of the Chevrolet pickups caught up with us. The pickup got to our side and hit the side of the car, marring the side of the driver's seat.

Just then, a big truck pulled in at the next turn, and before the pickup could hit the brakes, it collided mouth-to-mouth with the truck, from where I sat, I could tell that it would only take a few inches to save the pickup driver's legs from getting crushed with the front of the vehicle.

Turning into a new street didn't help in any way, as our chasers were on our trail. Just then, the sound of sirens wailing in the background was enough to warn us to get off the road before the police caught up with us.

Mathis made another sharp turn again, drifting like the pro that he was, but that didn't save us. It was not until he zoomed into a yellow light that we got saved, and the pursuers were left on the

other side of the road. They got out of their car and tried to shoot at us, but it was of no use any longer as we were far away by then.

“Phew! That is amazing!” exclaimed Gabriel from the back seat.

“Says the man that almost threw up in my car!” chipped in Mathis, laughing really hard. I also couldn’t hold back the laughter as I joined him in laughing.

“Well, here we are, guys,” said Mathis, switching off the engine of the car.

I looked out of the window on my side, and I could see the airport on the other side of the road.

“I thought I asked for a hotel?” I asked, somewhat disappointed.

“I brought you to a hotel,” answered Gabriel, pointing to his side of the car.

“Oh. That’s brilliant. close to the airport. Bravo!”

I breathed out a sigh of relief as I sat back in the chair, letting the seat swallow me. I needed to relax and figure out where to next meet up with Maya. Every part of me wished desperately that I had arrived earlier, but I was just pretty sure I couldn’t have.

The night was crawling into the evening. Almost every building, as far as my eyes could see, reflected so much light. The sound of cars zooming past on the street filled my ears.

Slowly, we began to deal with the issue at hand. I had to sit down and figure out the meeting with the cameraman. Meanwhile, I sent Mathis and Gabriel to the hotel to book us a room. I slipped the picture out of my pocket and then stared at myself.

At first, I realized how long it had been since I had last visited another country for a vacation. The thought of going on a vacation with Maya popped into my mind but immediately got hazy as my ex-wife’s picture intrigued my imagination. I bobbed

my head sideways in an attempt to shake off all the disturbing thoughts, and then I stared at the picture in my hand intently.

Turning the picture around, I played the words in my head with the voice of Maya, slowly and pleasurably listening to them as if they were a whisper in my ears.

What if I told you to look for something new in a new place? What would you do?

I then turned the word over and over in my head, trying my best to figure out what she meant. I knew she was trying to pass along information. Just then, something came into my mind. The flashing of light, even though it wasn't needed when the man took the picture, was strange. It even became stranger when the man completely ignored the question when Gabriel asked.

"Something new?" I hummed slowly. I turned to look at the picture, but I still couldn't connect the dots. Then it clicked all of a sudden, just when my mind was already getting derailed.

"The Statue of Liberty!" I exclaimed, just as Mathis and Gabriel returned to the car.

"What's up with that?" asked Gabriel.

"Look at the picture yourself," I said, showing the picture to Gabriel. "He literally made me pose like the Statue of Liberty."

"What if I told you to look for something new in a new place? What would you do?" read Gabriel.

"The New York in the text was literally staring right back at me as I was racking my head all this while," commented I.

"Let me see the picture," said Mathis. He must have already begun to feel left out as we spoke with no clear words.

"You didn't even ask what's going on here?" I asked swiftly.

“Oh, he knows everything now. I just gave him the answers when we went to check the room,” announced Gabriel.

“Alright.”

Soon, we went to the airport, booked a ticket for a flight that was going to New York, and then returned to the hotel to have a good night’s rest.

The morning came quickly, and we had to say goodbye to Paris and Mathis very quickly. The flight was a long one, and I was super exhausted when we arrived in New York. I figured out that it must have been the text I sent to Maya on Tinder that gave me away.

The thought of Maya had been on my mind for a very long time, almost immediately after the plane took off from Paris. I was missing our chats so much that I returned to them before starting to read and excite myself.

After checking out at the airport, Gabriel asked me to wait for him since he wanted to use the restroom.

“Make it quick, or I’ll dump you at the airport,” I said jokingly.

“You wouldn’t dare,” screamed Gabriel, and I chuckled softly.

I sat on one of the chairs in the very large hallways of the airport and raised my hand to look at my wristwatch. It was just midafternoon. The hall was completely buzzing with people, many of whom were just arriving from Paris. The automated sound of the lady who kept making the announcement kept getting into my head, and I just shook my head and blurted out the thought.

As I sat there in the hallway, completely ignored by everyone who passed me by, I began to feel lonely and crave the presence of my family. I missed Diya so much, and even the thoughts of

Hridya weren't far from my mind. During the previous days, I'd been to three different countries, chasing a girl that I had never seen before, and the zeal to want to find her didn't fade. The only issue I was having was that I had begun to doubt if she really even existed at all.

Aside from our Tinder chats, the only proof I had that she was real was that wherever I went in search of her, I would always find a trail of her. Looking back on how far I had come, I wished, of all things, that this was going to be the last country I visited.

Out of the blue, my thinking suddenly stopped, and my senses kicked in. An image of a man flashed before my eyes. I knew I hadn't seen the man before, so I just shook my head. Then I raised my head, and almost immediately, the same man that I had spotted in my head just a second ago walked past my front. It was then that it clicked in my head that I had actually seen him pass me by three times, and the last one made it the fourth. He wasn't Mexican, but I was sure he wasn't up to any good.

"Hey, let's go," called out Gabriel, spotting me from where he was coming from.

Just as I turned to look at Gabriel, then to look back, the man was gone.

"Come on. I don't feel comfortable where I am," I said as I pushed past the people around me. After getting down from the escalator, we headed straight for the entrance door. All the while, I was busy searching for the man, but I couldn't catch any glimpse of him.

Suddenly, just as we were about to step out of the door, I spotted a piece of cardboard that boldly had my name written on it. I stopped abruptly, and people bumped into me.

"Move, dummy," one of them said, and Gabriel jumped in to push me out of the mob.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Don’t you see my name on the cardboard outside?”

“I did, but why are you panicking? Doesn’t Maya know you’re supposed to be coming?”

“I know she’s aware, but she isn’t that dumb to ask to get my attention in that manner,” I argued.

“You might be right,” agreed Gabriel, as he began to stroke his chin, thinking. “Maybe there’s some hidden information in the text that was written.”

“That’s true,” I said, as I decided to peep at the cardboard. On it was R A H U L with different colors flooding the cardboard. From where I stood and watched, I could see that the cardboard contained all the types of colors one could think of, except that the letters R U L were painted in black. It caught my attention since that was the only black color on the cardboard.

As I thought of it deeply and wondered if it had any meaning, my eyes began to shift to other cards that were held up high. Strangely, there was an odd name two people away from where the cardboard that wielded my name was. It was boldly written as Charles Augustus. The name belonged to one of the antagonists of Sherlock Holmes, and coincidentally, the letters R, U, and L were painted black in the name.

A smirk climbed the corner of my mouth, and Gabriel, spotting the change in my expression, was prompted to ask what I had seen.

“Just follow my lead,” I said as I walked through the entrance of the building. I walked past the man who lifted the cardboard with Rahul and went straight to the other with Charles Augustus on his cardboard. I could feel the hesitation that came from Gabriel as we passed the cardboard to Rahul.

“Hello, I’m Sherlock Holmes,” I said to the man with the card.

“Hi, I’ve been expecting you, sire,” he said as he walked out of the crowd towards the parking spot.

“Before we move on, my good sir,” the man began, turning around to look into my eyes. The age of the man could be seen in his eyes as he squinted just so he could catch a glimpse of me.

He wore a pair of shorts with a blue top that said, “Stay sharp.” There was also a trace of obvious gray hair on his head that confirmed that he was indeed a grown man.

“I was instructed to ask you a few questions.” She said it’s just to confirm if you are the one,” said the old man.

At the mention of “she,” I was more than happy. I had the strongest feeling that I was going to be seeing her very soon.

“No problem, sire. Please carry on.”

“Alright.”

Gabriel was completely lost in what was happening, but like I had asked him to do, he simply followed me, like the way a baby duck follows its mother duck.

“The first question is to ask you if you’re in a tight spot and you have to choose a piece on the chess board, which piece would you choose?” asked the man.

“What sort of...”

“No! I know the reason for the question. You can’t understand,” I said, cutting off Gabriel from attacking the man with his words.

“We should get off the streets first. I don’t wish to get attacked on the streets of New York.”

When we arrived at the parking lot, near the car, I spilled the answer to the question the old man asked me.

"I'll be going with a knight." I didn't have to think of the answer to the question because it was a registered question in my mind. Something I don't forget.

"That's interesting," said the old man. "And tell me, why'd you pick a knight?"

The man asked with a furrowed brow, looking at me as if trying to read my mind. I knew that it was another trick question, so I gave a straight and strict answer.

"I chose a knight because it's my choice. If you do not have anything to offer me, kindly let me be on my way to find another alternative," I said in a stretch.

My brows were furrowed already, as the questions were already beginning to get too personal.

"Very well! You are who she said you are. "Get in the car," said the old man as he clicked on the car's remote, opening the car doors all at once.

I and Gabriel exchanged glances and quickly went around to get into the car. Just as Gabriel slammed his door, the man that I had seen in the airport, parading in front of me, came out of nowhere and sprinted for the car.

"Go! Go! Go! Go!" screamed I and Gabriel, completely agitated.

The old man started the car engine and did a quick reverse out of the parking spot, only escaping a scratch just inches away. At that point, I could swear my consciousness had jumped out of my skin.

Shorts were fired at the body of the car as the old man drove for the entrance of the car. The man had a pistol, which he used to shoot at the car, and I was confident that was what gave him the guts to step in front of the car.

The man stood in the way of the car, emptying the bullets from the cartilage. With no waning emotions, the old man drove into the man just before he could get his aim right. Soon, we were out of the parking lot and into the streets of New York in no time.

The sun was out, and the hustle and bustle of the city was at its peak. The continuous honking of cars as though we were in Hong Kong and the loud purring of engines filled the air. There were tall buildings from right to left, and people kept pouring in and out of them. All this happened in the background as my thoughts continually went to Maya. Wherever she was, I couldn't wait to see her.

After a few minutes' drive, I realized we had actually been going in circles. We had reappeared in front of the airport more than once, and even Gabriel noticed it and began to grumble. The third time, as we turned onto the road that led to the airport, I had to speak up.

"What's going on? We're literally just going in. Were we not?" I inquired, doing my best to maintain my cool.

"I know. It is intentional, and you will understand in a moment," answered the man.

He pulled over in front of the airport and then reached for his drawer on my side of the seat. He was struggling with it until I decided to help him take whatever it was; then, he could explain what we were doing back where we started.

He asked me to take the papers into the safe and check them. Doing as he instructed, I pulled out two tickets. One was a ticket flight to Mexico, while the other was to Italy. I was going to give them to him when my eyes caught a glimpse of something weird. On the ticket to Mexico was Gabriel's name imprinted boldly, and on the ticket to Italy was my name.

My jaws dropped in shock and amazement, laced with confusion as I stared at the man and back at the tickets.

“What are those?” asked Gabriel, though he didn’t wait for an answer but snatched the tickets from me. He was also dumbfounded to see what the tickets had to say.

“Your journey here must have been a decoy from Maya. She needed to make it seem as though you were here in New York, so you would be able to meet her up easily,” explained the old man. “And for you, my friend,” he said, turning to Gabriel, “you’ll have to return to Mexico and continue your life.”

So, there I was in the city of Rome, completely overwhelmed by the buildings around me. I would have refused if I had been told a week and a half ago that I was going to tour the world. The whole thing happened fast, and the only thing that could have made my mission difficult was the money. Gratefully, I had enough of it, and seeing that I needed it, I spent it.

I had said goodbye to my very good and old friend Gabriel at the airport where we both went our separate ways, and he had wished for me that I find love on my journey to Rome. I couldn’t wait to get back home to my best friend and tell him all about my story.

My flight to Italy was less stressful, so I had a very good rest all the way. Upon my arrival, there was already a taxi driver waiting to pick me up from the airport. After scrutinizing the taxi driver, I was glad there were no questions asked at that point when I approached him. All he did was open the door of his car for me and ask me to step in.

I was now seated comfortably in his car, staring out the window as I relished the beauty of the land. There were so many statues that symbolized a lot of things, and as we passed by most, I played the name in my head.

Looking back on the journey from where I started, I couldn't believe that I was that committed to meeting Maya. The constant question that had kept bubbling in a hidden part of my heart was, What was it? Was it the love that I had for her, or was it just lust since I couldn't get my ex-wife out of my mind?

I was about to delve into it when the taxi driver stopped in front of an apartment.

"When you get inside, go straight to room 12C on the second floor. She should be waiting for you there."

I said my thanks and got out of the car. At first, I was electrified by the new ground I had now stepped on. Maybe it was the thought of meeting Maya in the next few seconds that paralyzed me, or something else because I suddenly became numb. When I got into the building, I was looking straight at the elevator that welcomed me with open arms, but something caused me to go for the stairs instead.

Heeding to the unseen force that controlled me, I took the stairs to the first floor. There, I entered a long corridor with a distance that seemed unending. The doors on both sides of the wall stretched so far that I thought I was going nuts. I shook my head, and, putting my shit together, I stumbled upon the brownish-red wooden door.

I breathed in and out heavily, as though I were about to face my biggest fear ever. Deep down, it felt as if I was scared of what lay beyond the door. I wanted to see her face so badly. I wanted to cup her face in my hand and feel the softness of her cheek so badly. But then, there was a greater part of me that caused me to become drowsy. The part of me that felt more like my head was spinning round and round

Slowly, I summoned all the courage and boldness in me to raise my hand and knock on the door with a rather loose fist. As if

she was expecting the knock on the door, she screamed, “Who’s there?” and I was thrown aback.

I literally took visible steps backward, seeing that her voice was just as melodious as I had imagined it to be. They sounded so melodious that the drowsiness and hesitation that I had in me immediately dissolved like snow in a smoking pot. My eyes widened, and there was a rapid rush of adrenaline in my head that I could not control.

“It’s—it is I, Rahul,” I answered slowly, making sure my Indian accent clouded the whole thing.

“If you were to set a riddle for a very important reward, what would it be?” asked the voice.

There was no iota of surprise in me when the question was thrown at me. However, there was that sharpness in her voice that made it difficult for me to decipher if she was even glad that I was in her presence at all.

“Uh, that would be...” I said, thinking of the perfect answer. I couldn’t tell why she would choose such a question, and looking back at our previous chats and conversations, I couldn’t remember any discussion that had that element in it. Regardless, it was Maya, and I knew I had to dance to her tune. “I got a pretty face. Sometimes it smiles, and sometimes it doesn’t. It’s got hands, but nobody. Faces come in different sizes and shapes, too. What am I?”

“And—and what will your answer be?” asked the voice.

“Uh, that should be...” I slowed and began to think. I knew the answer like I knew the back of my hand, but something caused me to stop and ask myself why the question sounded familiar. My thoughts brought back all the questions that I had previously asked and something, and I knew something weird was going on.

“Screw this,” said the voice, interrupting my thoughts.

Immediately, the door flung open to reveal a small figure, Latina, and the face, of course, I will never forget. There was Maya, clad in a crop top and a skimpy skirt that revealed her ties, simultaneously taking my breath away.

She jumped forward and held me tight in a breathtaking but warm embrace that I couldn’t resist. Her fragrance was captivating, and I wished I could be left in that state of mind for the rest of my life.

She leaned back from the embrace slowly and without warning, as if the craving for a kiss shared between us two had actually been a mutual one. She planted her lips on mine, and there were electric sparks that went haywire in my head.

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Chapter 9

The next day came and quickly passed, but for me, every hour spent with Maya felt like an eternity. She was soft and gentle not just in her looks but in her character. Her petite body was buried in my arms all night as we cuddled. She refused to talk about how long my adventure in finding her was and then mentioned that I should only focus on the fact that I was with her.

The morning came, and we went out for sightseeing and a lot of other activities. We took a lot of pictures too, and we had all our meals together. We occasionally shared kisses too, but it wasn't anything intense. Just like we chatted, she immediately grew fond of calling me Baby, even in reality, and whenever she did, it only gave me goosebumps.

The night was on us, and we had just had dinner in the most luxurious restaurant we could find. I had also decided to change the room earlier, or even if it was to spend a night at a high-rated hotel, to make our encounter more romantic.

As we walked out of the elevator and down the corridor laced with endless lights towards the door of our room, she reached for my hand. There was a rush of dopamine in my body, and it caused me to want more of her all of a sudden. I wanted to hold her and touch every part of her that I could get my hands on.

The tension in the air was thick as we made precise steps towards the door. When we got to the door, just as I was about to use the card, she turned her face to me, bent my head, and gave me a passionate kiss. Sparks flew all around in my head, and all my head screamed was its want for more.

I grabbed her by her waist as I opened the door and carried her up. She understood the action, so she immediately wrapped her legs around me, maintaining contact between her lips and mine. I held her tight as I staggered into the room, savoring every ounce of juice I could suck from the pleasurable kiss. I found my way to the big master's bed that was covered with a neat white duvet and dropped her on the bed. We didn't even realize it when we walked past the luxurious sitting room into the fancy bedroom.

Right there on the bed was where we wrote the tales of the exotic time we shared. Even the framing of the bed could testify to how much shaking it went through. Our sweat was missed together in a pleasurable manner as I caused her feeble legs to shake and tremble. Her mouth tirelessly moaned from the pleasurable pain it went through and still begged for more strokes and for me to keep it coming.

There was a ceaseless calling of "baby" all through the night, and we went from one position to another. Whenever the word was spelled out, it gave me a new burst of energy that I used to cause her legs to shake. The scene of the night made it hot, no matter how cold the atmosphere got. We both gave it all we got, just like we had been craving for centuries. We then slept in after all our energy had been completely exhausted. Naked, we lay underneath the duvet together since I couldn't count how long I had been in her. It was an experience I couldn't generate alone while in my bathroom.

The morning seemed farfetched, but the blazing sun that poured into the room as the blinds were drawn caused me to come alive from whatever dream I was having. Looking around, my vision was at first as hazy as my then-fading dream, but as I blinked and rubbed my eyes, the vision came into view.

There she was—the most beautiful girl on my planet at that point. She had on a big shirt, and her pants became visible as she

raised her hands. Her lush, long, blonde hair complimented her honey-toned skin, and I couldn't help but crave more of it. My head was clouded with the thoughts of her smell, her touch, and her gaze. I wondered what sort of enchantment she had used on me.

"Good morning, baby!" said Maya delightedly with her soothing voice, which caused me to hear symphonies in my head and made me think as though I was in heaven already.

I grunted slowly and yawned, getting all the tiredness out of my system. "Baby."

"Look what I made for you," said Maya as she jumped on the bed by my side, pointing to my left.

I turned around, and right there was a cup of coffee with a heart designed in it with the milk. My heart melted straight away, and I wondered if I would ever let her get out of my life.

I thanked her with a long kiss, and I pulled her in for another round of knee-shaking, but she pushed me away gently.

Maya said, "I'm famished, so I've got to go get us food," as she quickly got off of the bed and disappeared from the bedroom.

I let myself fall back into the comfort of the bedroom after getting denied what I had had so much of, but I wasn't going to turn down another offer. After a minute had passed, I sat up to take the steaming coffee. Just as I took my first sip, I was gifted a memory from the past. It was about the time I last had coffee, which was the exact moment when I was setting the security questions to get the password to the vault I was in charge of back in Dubai.

My head began to play back to the events of the last few days, especially the questions people were asked by her to ask, and then all the emotions and feelings that had built up in me crumbled.

It was hard for me to wrap my head around how suddenly I was free from Maya's enchantment.

"No! no! It can't be."

I got up from the bed and dropped the coffee right back on the side shelf. I then began to pace the room and think, and just then, I remembered that I was very close to bursting her bubble on our first encounter, and because I was about to do that, she decided to skip the question and distract me.

As I paced the room, her phone buzzed on the table where she had left it, and I quickly ran over to pick it up. It was just a random text, but a quick idea popped into my head. All I knew of Maya was what I was told and made to believe, and the love, or should I say lust, had blinded my eyes to see exactly what she was doing.

I was more than grateful to the organizers of the hotel, as each room came with its personal computer. I needed to dig deep into Maya's life and find my own set of information about her. I plugged her phone into the system, and after cladding myself with a white towel, I sat behind the table to hack into her phone.

As the master genius that I was, it only took me a few minutes to do it. Of all that I knew, I was pretty confident that if she actually was, even after the answers to the security questions, of which she had all but the last one, she wouldn't concur with the allegations except if I had proof.

After doing a thorough search through her phone, I noticed some sketchy things, and if I were to look at them from the eyes of Sherlock, I would deduce that she was a spy. It wasn't long after this that I found a thread of messages between her and an anonymous messenger. I was literally shocked to the bone as I read through the texts one after the other.

From there, my heart sank in despair, deep down to the bottom of the ocean of my body. All my adventures, spending, and

sacrifices were for nothing. All my energy was just to chase a girl who was only after my life. I couldn't believe that I had gotten through so easily. She was smart, and while I thought I was smart and I was playing Sherlock Holmes, I was being drained of all the information that I had kept so dear.

It was at this point that I remembered my failing marriage and my conflict with my wife. She loved me, and I knew she still did, but I was being foolish. I let so-called love blind me, and I became completely distracted from what was most important to me: my family.

As if on cue, Maya walked in with two bags of nylon, and I could tell they contained food or things of that sort. Though that wasn't my bone of contention at that point, Maya paused at the door as she saw me sitting behind the computer with her phone in my palm.

My face was swollen already, and the anger in my heart was bubbling, but the more I tried to keep it bottled in, the more I struggled.

"You've been a crook all this while," I said with a breaking voice. The statement wasn't exactly a question or an accusation, but I was certain that my message was passed across just the way I wanted it.

"I—you..."

"What exactly do you have to say for yourself? Tell Me..." I asked as I screamed with so much anger.

"You're right. So right."

"Right about what?" screamed me in so much rage.

"Being a crook Or a bitch or whatever it is you want to call me, but I sure do know something for sure."

"Know what?"

“That I love you, Rahul.”

“Spare me that bullshit, you piece of shit. Cock sucker bitch!”

As I screamed the words out of my flaming lungs, I watched as Maya broke down in tears. A part of me wanted to take the words back, move closer, and console her, but there was another side of me that wanted the insults to keep flowing. Considering her state, if I were to critically assess the situation, I would say she was sincere with the tears and the words she said, claiming that she loved me since it was the first time she would confess her love for me and also add my name. Though I was more than sure that emotion is dynamic and just might be the trickiest gift nature has given man,

“You can’t fill me with those tears of yours,” I said as I walked over to the bed and sat down. She raised her head to look up at me, and her face had already been drenched in tears.

“I tried to avoid this,” said Maya as she tried to hold back the tears, though it didn’t work. It was a lost battle for her at that point. “I was going to tell you about it after breakfast, but you’re too smart and wouldn’t even wait that long.”

“Of course, I’m smart, but I guess I was easily played by you.”

“No. You weren’t played. What we had, what we shared It was real.”

I shook my head in opposition. That can’t be the truth. She was trying to get into my head again, just like she had done earlier, and I had toured the whole of the world.

“I need something. Something tangible and proof-worthy.”

Even though I was insanely pissed and more infuriated as the clock ticked, I still wished what we shared was real. I didn’t want all my traveling and journeying from Dubai around the world to Italy. There had to be a part of everything real.

“Pick up your phone,” said Maya in a firm tone, and I shot her glances to warn her to maintain her position.

“What does my phone have to do with all this?” I asked as I snatched my phone from the shelf.

“Check your last recorded video.”

This instruction caused me to go puzzled as I wondered what she was driving at. with a lot of hesitation in my actions and numerous dead stares. I unlocked my phone and went straight into the gallery.

I was shocked when I saw a video of Maya in the blue shirt, and with the environment, I could tell it was that morning for sure. I played the recorded video, and throughout the video, I just couldn't get my eyes off my screen.

“Hey, Rahul. I hope this video finds you in a good way because it might ruin everything good for you.

Sigh! First of all, I love you so much more than you can comprehend, but fate has chosen to make our paths cross this way alone. I wish we had met under different circumstances, but I still cannot picture myself meeting you any other way. Having established my love for you, I think I should proceed.”

I raised my head to take a glance at Maya, and her head was still bowed as she sat on the ground. I could only guess from the sound that came from her that she was feeling tortured by the sound of her voice.

“I never really revealed myself to you the way I should have. I'm not—I'm not who you think I am. “Just as she said the word, a tear dropped from her cheek in the video, and she used the back of her hand to wipe it off. She then swallowed and continued.

“I'm a spy. I'm not a good spy, Rahul. I'm more... I'm more of a mercenary who works for the highest bidder.”

As she said the words, she went silent. I was puzzled and dumbfounded. She had actually opened up to me indirectly, probably expecting me to find it when she wasn't around.

"I do love you, Rahul. I can't express how you make me feel," she continued, clearly crying. But I know I have betrayed you. "All I ask for is your forgiveness."

She then continued, after taking her time to wipe her tears from her cheek, "I was hired by a man to get all the information I could extract from you on the answers to your security questions. I came up with a way in which I could get you to answer the questions without having to figure it out. My conscience has been eating me up all this time, and I knew I had to open up to you."

She then smiled in the video and said, "When that knock came on my door and I heard your voice, I just couldn't resist how much I wanted to see you. I couldn't even wait to get the last bit of information from you that I had to open the door and welcome you. The plan was to get the answer and disappear, but I couldn't. I was tied down by my own emotions."

She stopped talking suddenly and turned the phone to me as I slept on the bed while she was on the chair. "You're such an amazing soul, and all I want to do now is make things right with you. Sigh! I hope this message finds you well."

The video ended.

The next few minutes were filled with absolute silence as I stared blankly into the wall, and Maya remained on the floor, not sobbing, but her mood was also down. I had a lot of thoughts running through my head, and I didn't even know which of them to process first. Surely, that was proof that her words were true and sincere. Meanwhile, she was still indebted to whoever hired her.

“What are you going to do with the answers I gave? They are just mere words,” asked I. I wasn’t sure what to think exactly. She could know her way around it and also have no clue what to do with the answer.

“The first answer is eighty-two,” said Maya hesitantly as she looked up. “You rearranged the letters of the alphabet backward, making letter Z, one, and letter Y, 2. Just like that. Then you picked the initials of the name, changed them to numbers, and then added them together. That was the way the first code for the vault was formed. For every other letter where the total sums up to a number above a hundred, you do it the normal way. Trust me; I’m more of a Sherlock Holmes junior myself.”

It was only after I chuckled that I realized my craziest codes had been cracked.

“I’m really sorry it had to turn out this way. I didn’t plan to fall in love with”

“Just—just stop saying those words, Maya,” I snapped, standing from the side of the bed and pacing the room.

“Who’s the anonymous?” asked I in anticipation. I had high hopes that she was going to know who it was, but I was disappointed when I saw the shaking of her head, which caused all my hopes to fly away like eagles in the sky.

“I tried to figure out who it was, but the line is very secure. The only thing I know is that the person lives in Dubai.”

“How do you know this? Were you told?” I asked, remembering that it wasn’t in the chat.

“No. I wasn’t told, but I have my ways.”

I furrowed my brows and looked at her with a look that said I wanted to know all the details.

“Okay. Fine. There was a time when there was a loophole in his encryption, and I was able to get the location of the person. There’s a high chance that whoever it is lives in Dubai. Living in another country is not really feasible.”

“Alright. Here’s what we will do,” I began, and she didn’t even let me continue before cutting me off.

“We?”

“We do, indeed. Or don’t you love me anymore?” I asked.

“I do! I do!” exclaimed Maya as she got to her feet.

“Like I was saying, this is what we are going to do. You’ll ask the person for a meet-up. You then make it a compulsory meet-up, or else you won’t be releasing the codes. Whoever they are, they sure are desperate to get those codes, so we’ll use them against them.”

“I’m sure the plan is not to give them the codes, is it?” asked Maya.

“Of course not. Do you even know all the codes?” I asked, with a smirk.

I was stunned by how very quickly the tables had turned, and I was smiling at her again. She was going to ruin my life, but sometimes nature can’t be beaten. I loved her and she loved me, and that was enough reason to continue our relationship and forgive her too.

“I don’t, but you’ll... never mind,” she said, stopping herself from saying what it was she wanted to say. I saw it as a good choice since I didn’t even tell my ex-wife, considering how much I loved her.

“Just leave that before I lose my temper again.”

“Alright, baby,” said Maya. I shot her a look that caused her to shrink. The message I got was crystal clear.

My phone began to ring on the bed, and that caused me to sprint for it. I didn't know why I did, but I really did need to get out of the room and clear my head. Maya's enchantment for me was so strong whenever she was around me.

I picked up the call early enough and walked towards the door. It was my best friend, Anand. I was elated just at the initial sight of his call. I was relieved to have a change of mood and really just wanted to talk to someone. It was a long week for me after the unending traveling, and I wasn't sure if it was worth it. Though I was very hopeful,

"Hello, Anand!" I said it in a loud tone. I was confident that Maya must have heard me call out his name.

"Hey, Rahul! Where have you been all this time? I didn't even get a call from you," rushed Anand as his voice sounded from the phone.

"Oh, Anand. You've missed me, uh. It's been a long time since I've been here and there. You cannot believe..."

"Rahul! Rahul! Keep mute and let me talk, please," cut Anand.

"Oh, sorry. I'm just so excited," answered I as I walked into the kitchen, seeking privacy.

"Where have you been, Rahul?" asked Anand again.

"Well, I'm in Italy at the moment."

"What exactly are you doing in... alright. I need you to return home as soon as you can. Your appointment is tomorrow, and I have a business meeting at the same time, and I can't miss the meeting."

"Aish. I apologize for that. I'll be on my way back as soon as I can," I said with enthusiasm.

Aside from the fact that Anand was going to be absent, I knew it was high time I returned home and secured the custody of my child. I had already missed Diya so much, and I knew what to do to make it up to her.

What's your dream girl? Have you found her yet? Who am I kidding? You definitely found her; that's why you're so distracted and have refused to come home."

"Well, there are many stories to tell, and they will all be told when I return." All you need to know at the moment is that I found her, and you just might be seeing her in Dubai," I answered with a hint of excitement in my voice.

"Uhuh! That sounds like a lot of fun," said Anand.

"It is. We've had so much fun," I answered.

"Good for you, brother. I have to go and attend to something. "You be a good boy, okay?" he said, chuckling.

"Alright then. We'll be seeing soon," I said, and I waited for Anand to cut the call.

I sighed and then went into the living room and let the sofa engross me. I began to play back all the events of the last few days. From the corner of my eye, I saw Maya walk into the sitting room, and slowly, she made her way to my side on the sofa. Gently, she leaned in to check if I would let her rest on me, and without hesitating, I pulled her in for a warm embrace.

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Chapter 10

The day after I got the call, I and Maya were welcomed to Dubai as our plane made a run on the runway. Out of all the flights that I had taken since I began the journey to find Maya, none of them were as interesting as the one I had just experienced. Maya and I had completely reconciled and then continued our love journey from Italy. I couldn't believe that I was going to forgive her that quickly until it happened. I guess when you're in love, nothing else really matters.

We walked out of the plane with her hands in mine and a broad smile on my face. It was still early in the morning, and I was quite certain that I would make it to the last court meeting. On the other hand, I had a medium-sized travel bag with all the things I had bought for Diya while in Italy. I even convinced Maya to follow me to the mall there, regardless of how tired she claimed to be.

After we passed through the checkpoint of the arrival section, we walked into the ever-crowded hall of Dubai's airport. Maya was just as stunned as every first-timer would be at how beautiful the hall was. I was certain that if the hall wasn't crowded, Maya would have attempted to dance in the middle of the hall.

"You haven't been to Dubai before?" I asked as I dodged the shoulder of a gentleman who was walking towards me.

"No. I haven't, actually. This is a dream come true," said Maya as she breathed in deeply.

“I thought you were a traveler. Isn’t Dubai one of the countries on your target list? And don’t tell me it’s money because I know you do have the money,” I said, causing her to chuckle as she squeezed my hand more.

“I had a plan. I was only going to come to Dubai for a vacation, and I was planning on staying in one of the seven-star hotels or the under-water hotel.”

“Oh wow! I see! You’ve got quite a vision, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. I see what I like, I have the money, and I go for it. That’s my principle,” revealed Maya.

“That’s incredible, but I see you broke that because of love, eh?” I asked mockingly, and she raised her head to look into my eyes as she smiled shyly. She pushed herself into me, and I staggered sideways a little, laughing.

We walked out of the airport’s entrance, still hand in hand, and I then brought out my phone to track the Uber I had ordered. The location of the car made me glad, and I turned to Maya.

“It’s just around the corner.”

“That’s okay. I guess its quick response is going to rub me off this pretty view,” explained Maya, and tracing her vision, I could see her eyes staring intently at the huge skyscraper in front of her.

“Uh, I see you’ve found a new lover so quickly,” I said jokingly, and she blushed again.

“I didn’t think you were this good with ladies,” said Maya as she reached for my face. I obliged and moved my face towards her, planting a kiss on her juicy lips. Her lips always get me electrified whenever I engage with them, but oddly, I didn’t feel the sizzling feeling that always rips through my bones.

It was a very strange feeling since I was sure I was still in love with her. She didn’t seem to notice my reaction when I pulled

away, and I was just glad. Instead, she hugged my arm tightly as we awaited the Uber. I also wasn't sure if it was the fact that we were outside by the road, but I was sure it felt odd to kiss her. Not long after, the red Camry pulled over in front of us. After I had dropped the suitcase in the trunk of the car, I got into the passenger's seat, and the car drove off.

I noticed Maya was a clingy partner, and she tried as much as she could to hold on to me anytime she had the chance. Her show of emotions began to cause me to even question if she was indeed a spy at all. Though, if she wasn't a spy, I knew we wouldn't even be beside each other at that moment. My phone buzzed, and I reached for it from my pocket. The time was sixteen minutes past eight, and that was the first thing I noticed when I opened my phone.

The next was the message that was sent by Anand. I opened it and read, "Where are you, Rahul? Better tell me you're in the country because the court proceeding starts at ten and I need to be out of here by 10:30."

I let a smirk climb onto my face as I read the words in Anand's voice in my head. Maya was now resting her head on my legs, so she couldn't see the message. I then decided to respond to Anand so that he would keep his cool.

"Morning Anand. I'm sorry I have caused you so much trouble. It's all good news, and I'm in the country. I should make it to court just in time. You don't have to worry. I've got the love of my life.

I was about to type the last sentence when I stopped halfway. Rethinking the sentence, I then deleted the last line and sent in the message. I heaved heavily, and the sudden thought of my ex-wife flooded my consciousness. It was strange that I had another woman resting her head on my legs while I was trying to fight the woman I once loved for custody of our child.

The Uber came to an abrupt halt and parked in front of a grand hotel. I didn't even know that the Uber had entered the compound of the hotel at that point.

"Maya, this is your stop," I announced as I tugged at her shoulder. With her reluctance and her hesitation, I was sure she didn't want to let me out of her sight yet.

"Don't worry, Maya. I'll be back soon. I promise," I said, reassuring Maya.

"Don't go for too long. I'll be waiting," said Maya with a waning voice as she stepped out of the car.

After she picked up her bag, the car zoomed off, and I couldn't help but stare at her from the glass behind. Her wonderful figure was well portrayed by the blue sleeveless gown she wore and the jacket she wore on top of it. She was frozen, just like a statue, as she stared at the moving car. There was no doubt in my mind that she truly did love me.

I finally turned away when I couldn't see her face properly and focused on the next task at hand: getting Diya into my custody.

The Uber drove into my compound, and I got out, carried my suitcase, and made my way to the house. I had a spare key, so getting into the house wasn't an issue for me. I didn't exactly expect to meet anyone at home, as I assumed they would all have been in court by then.

I looked around and, taking in the atmosphere of the house, I commented.

"Oh, how I miss this home." It wasn't until after I had said it that it dawned on me that I wouldn't have agreed if anyone told me I would miss my home, considering all that had transpired in the last few months.

I had all the time in the world to reflect on the things that were happening in my life recently, but I chose to watch a recap of the mystery episodes I had missed. As I made my way up the stairs and headed for my room, I felt a sharp pain of guilt plunge into my heart. I knew very well that I wasn't the devil in the matter, but I couldn't help but feel guilty for the fact that I sought refuge outside my matrimonial home.

As the hinges of the door budged to the strength I used to open the door, I was taken aback by the sight that lay before me. Right in front of me, close to the wall, was a broken frame of the picture of me and Hridya's wedding. Just then, I knew what happened to it. I could literally see Hridya walk up to the frame on the wall this morning with so much anger boiling in her, and as she removed it from its place, she smashed the frame on the floor and then walked out of the room.

I shook my head and moved closer to the broken frame, and that was when I noticed something else. I picked up the picture from within the frame, and with my detective abilities, I could tell that the picture had come into contact with water. I searched the glasses, and, not too long later, I found a couple of shattered glasses with what could be likened to drops of water. Quickly, as I began to calculate, I got up from my crouching position and made precise strides towards the reading table, very close to the open window.

My heart sank deep into despair just as I got there. What I saw changed the whole narrative of the story. There were traces of water droplets on the reading table, or better yet, teardrops. I looked up, and the true act that had taken place in the room played before my eyes again, taking a different initiative this time.

She must have walked up to the picture in very slow motion, and after taking the frame from its place, she clutched it dearly in an

embrace and walked towards the window just to get a perfect view of the frame. She must have sobbed so softly that her heart bled for me. The tears had landed on the frame and the table, and just when she couldn't take it anymore, she let her anger get the better of her and flung the frame across the room.

As I thought of this, I could feel a tear roll down my cheek as the pain she must have felt cursed through my heart. I didn't want to unleash the emotions that were building in my heart, so I just got up quickly and wiped the tears off my cheek.

Checking the time on my phone, it was just six minutes past nine, and I knew I still had the luxury of time to do whatever I wanted to do. A few minutes later, I had taken my shower, and I was also dressed in a black and white tuxedo. All that kept me back was the ride I was waiting for. At exactly nine-thirty a.m., Anand's message vibrated through my phone. Upon opening it, I read

"Where are you, man? Remember, I can't wait much longer, and you've actually got a situation here to handle."

I quickly texted, "What is it? I'm almost on my way."

"I can't tell you by text. Just get down here."

I tapped on the counter with my fingers as I waited impatiently for the ride. A minute felt like an eternity, and the next minute made me think I wasn't breathing the right way anymore. Just then, I sprinted out of the house, locked the door, and just as I got to the gate, my ride arrived.

"What took you so long?" I asked, even though I knew the driver had actually arrived on time. The driver was about to give a response when I interrupted him and said, "Just... drive and ignore me, please."

I tapped my fingers on my legs all through the drive as I impatiently waited to get to the courtroom. While I waited in

the car, I couldn't think of anything else, as my mind was only on getting into the courtroom. While on the way, I got a call from Maya, and after contemplating whether to pick up or not, I finally picked up the call.

"Hello, Baby! I hope all is going fine," asked Maya.

"Yes. Yes. I'm almost at the court building. "I answered in haste. When she called me Daddy, it helped reduce the tension that had already built up in my body.

"That's good. You're still on time. I called to ask for an answer to the last question. The anonymous person texted again and asked that we meet by 11:30 at a location. I'll send you the location. Maya explained.

"Oh! That's great news, I assume," I said. "Uhm, a clock. Use that as the final answer. I'll meet up with you after the court meeting."

"Alright, Baby. Goodbye and good luck," said Maya, and that caused me to smile.

I spotted a boutique that had on display a white doll, relatively small, and an idea popped into my head. The courtroom was a couple of meters away from where we were, and there was traffic ahead. Checking the time, it was just five minutes to ten. I paid the driver in cash, jumped out of the car in a rush, and slammed into the door of the store. I purchased the teddy bear and placed it in a thin carton bag. Then, getting out of the store, I sprinted for the court building, pushing every passerby who wanted to act as though they didn't see me coming.

I got to the entrance of the courtroom just a minute past ten, and as if I were prepared for it, I removed a handkerchief from my pocket and used it to wipe my face thoroughly. Putting myself together, I made my way up the flight of stairs, and finally, I entered the court building.

I knew my way to the courtroom, so I hastened my footsteps, and in the next minute, I pushed the brown door open. Instead of entering a quiet courtroom, the room was rowdy, and the judge was leaving her seat already. There was muttering and chatting in the room, and people were moving around the rows of benches in the room.

Looking to the front of the courtroom, I spotted Diya on her mother's shoulder. Hridya was having a word with my lawyer and Anand, and that seemed confusing. I had expected everyone to be at their respective places, probably waiting for the case to commence. I walked swiftly towards the front of the case room, and just then, Diya saw me.

"Papa!" screamed Diya as she got off her mother's shoulder. She sprinted across the space between the benches, causing everyone, even the departing judge, to turn and watch. I went down on my knees and opened my hand to give my beautiful daughter a warm embrace.

I caught her and hugged her for a couple of seconds, exchanging a father-daughter hug. I pulled away, reached for the bag that I dropped by my side, and pulled out the white teddy.

"Look what Papa's got for you," I said, shaking the teddy in front of her. She reached for it with enthusiasm, her face flooding with joy.

"Thank you, Daddy!" She appreciated it, and I carried her in my hands. I walked towards the group in front, and before I got there, I asked, "What's going on here?"

I tried my very best not to look Hridya in the eye, but when I caught a glimpse of her face, I could tell that she had been crying for too long. I felt an immediate guilt wash through my entire body as I forced myself to look away.

"Welcome back, Rahul," Anand said, clenching his fist and stretching it out for a fist bump.

It was obviously because I couldn't hug him since I was still holding on to Diya.

"Where exactly did you go, sir? That is not how this works," said Mr. Siddharth.

Ignoring him, I turned away and faced Anand, curious about what was happening in the courtroom.

"You said the court session starts at ten o'clock in the morning. This is just a few minutes after ten. Please tell me what's happening here."

Before Anand could even attempt to answer the question, a voice was raised in the courtroom, and even though I was away for a while, the source of the voice was crystal clear in my head.

"After all I've done for that naughty brat standing there, if she still decides to disobey and disgrace me, it's alright. Keep up the good work. The Almighty will see you true. You do--"

I blurred out the words of the mother of Hridya and then turned towards my friend to hear what he had to say.

"She called off the case," said Anand, sighing deeply.

The words sounded too foreign to me, as I hadn't expected the sudden outcome. After continuing with the proceedings while I was gone, she finally mustered the courage and went against the will of her stubborn mother to withdraw the case and end the fight. It sounded so foreign, and even though every single thing pointed to it, I still couldn't believe my ears. I had to hear from the horse's mouth.

I turned to look at her, and the words that were going to come out of my mouth got stuck in my throat. For the first time in a very long time, I felt entirely remorseful, from the tip of my head to the sole of my shoes. No part had another opinion. Hridya's face was swollen, and though it was strategically covered up with makeup, I could still tell.

Just by looking at her, I saw the reason I had fallen in love with her. It wasn't all because of her sparkling eyes or her never-disappearing beauty, but because of her beautiful soul. I just couldn't wrap my head around it. She dropped her face, breaking the eye contact between us both, and stared at her feet with her fingers intertwined around each other nervously.

"I'm tired of fighting, Rahul. It only feels like more sorrow to me. I'm tired of my flaws; they only make me sick. I want to be happy again. I want to be me! "Not a copy of me that my mother wants to create," said Hridya as she finally looked hopeful, holding my gaze in hers. My heart swelled with excitement, and it felt as if it was going to explode. I was overwhelmed with joy as the Hridya I had promised now and forever stood in front of me. It had been a very long time since I had seen her like that.

The room was now quiet, as the drop of a pin could be heard from any corner of the room. Everyone could feel the emotional tension that had risen between the two of us, and even Hridya's mother couldn't disrupt it at that point.

I wish I could say I had tons to say, but it would only be a juicy lie, as the only words that were on the tip of my tongue were the eight letters and three words. I dropped Diya slowly to the ground and motioned forward, and without rethinking it, I gave her a big hug. It felt heavenly as I did, and that was when it became crystal clear to me. I loved Hridya more than I loved any other person on the face of the planet. I was only going after Maya because I needed to feel the attention and the feeling of being loved. I was attracted to her, but not as much as I love Hridya.

"I'm so sorry, Hridya. Wipe your tears and worry less. Everything will be okay," I said as I pulled away slowly. She nodded in response and reached for her handkerchief.

“Take Diya with you. We’ll sort this out when everything dies down. Take some time off. I need some time off to think about this matter. We’ll keep in touch,” said I.

I then turned to my lawyer and said, “Thank you, sir. It’s been a pleasure to work with you.” I reached for Mr. Siddharth’s hand to shake him, but even though he did it hesitatingly, I didn’t act as though I noticed. He looked at me with puzzled eyes as I shook his hand.

“What are you doing, Rahul?” asked Anand with a squeezed face.

“Uh, I’m so sorry for having stressed you this much, but I’m letting the sleeping dog lie. I don’t want to be the one to start the trouble.”

“Come on, man, you’ve almost won this. Why throw it all away?” Anand pressed, obviously pissed with the decision to let it go.

“It’s my choice, Anand. I don’t think it’s the right thing to do.”

“Seriously?” insisted Anand.

“Anand, stop it. Who are you to insist on this matter? Are you my father?” It was not until I had finished my statement that I realized that I had said the wrong words.

Anand looked at me with parted lips and shock on his face, and without saying anything, he stepped out of my front and headed for the exit.

“Anand, I’m sorry,” I apologized, calling after him.

“Let me be Rahul; I have work to do rather than waste my precious time here.

“Please, Anand, you...” I was still saying it when another call came in. It was from Maya, and just seeing her name caused me to feel overwhelmed by all the activities.

“Hello,” I said, just after I picked up the call.

“How’s it going?” asked Maya.

“It’s going well; I’ll have to call you later, okay?”

“Alright, baby. Talk to you later,” said Maya, just before she hung up.

The word that had always excited me or reduced any sort of tension I was feeling suddenly made me cringe, and I quickly shook off the feeling. I wanted to settle everything with Hridya before things went sideways again and her mother poisoned her mind.

Turning around, I was hit with the sudden realization of what I was doing. I had traveled to four different countries just to pick up Maya, and now I would have to leave her so I could return to my ex-wife. I was stunned and puzzled as my brain went numb. I walked forward and settled into the row where Hridya and Diya sat. I couldn’t look at them, as the guilt of having cheated on her gripped me strongly. I needed to say something to her, or else I was going to explode from the guilt.

Before I could, my phone beeped, and it was a text from Maya. I wanted to push it aside and focus on my turn-apart family when I remembered it could actually be about the meeting. I opened it, and, lo and behold, I was right.

“Ground floor, Al Wafa Tower, next to Dubai Islamic Bank-Sheikh. It’s a coffee shop. Anonymous said to meet him there in the next forty-five minutes.” The message has been read.

I was going to get split into two again, and that was a major problem at that point. I needed to attend to Hridya, and at the same time, I needed to know what sort of person was after the gold in the vault I was meant to safeguard.

“Where did you go, Rahul?” asked Hridya in a subtle voice. I couldn’t believe I would allow her to ask such a question and feel obligated to answer. I hesitated a bit, and her next question showed that she noticed.

“Is everything alright? Is it work?”

“Yes, yes it is,” I answered in a rush. I couldn’t be blamed because I was given the free get-away card and I took it. It wasn’t a lie since it was my work I had to attend to.

“Something came up, and I have to go attend to it. I’ll order a ride to take you and Diya back home. Your mother can follow you if you wish. When I get back, we’ll discuss this matter, and I’m very hopeful all will turn out well,” I said in my most convincing voice.

Hridya agreed with no worry, as her trust in me had been reignited. After I ordered the ride and paid for it in their presence, I kissed Diya and made my way out of the court building, ordering myself a ride too.

Fifteen minutes passed before my ride finally arrived, but I was sure I was still going to meet up at the stipulated time. The ride was slow, and we somehow got caught up in traffic. The driver finally maneuvered his way through it, and if not for him, I wouldn’t have made the discovery that changed my life entirely.

The car came to a stop in front of the coffee shop, which turned out to be an outdoor setting, and I could easily be spotted. I was presented with a vendor who sold caps, glasses, and other accessories, and I quickly made the payment for a black cap to conceal my face a little.

I took off my suit jacket as the heat was extreme and the cap wouldn’t match the dress. It was wise of me to try and hide my face because whoever wanted those codes from me would definitely recognize me.

The sun shone brightly, pouring its rays of radiance on all things, both animate and inanimate, and the whole place was lit, leaving no shadow concealed. There were a couple of tables with two to three seats at each table, and a blue umbrella protruded from the center of the table to shield the customers from the sun. At least some of the tables were occupied, and with twenty-six tables to my count, it would take me a while to find them.

I needed to blend in, so I walked towards the counter and pretended as though I wanted to get something for myself.

“One moment, please,” said the blonde female in the salesgirl uniform. She had an American accent, and it was then that I figured it must be an American establishment. I scanned through the tables in search of Maya, and after going through the whole table twice, I finally laid eyes on her. She was now wearing a red hair wig, and that had thrown me off initially.

That wasn’t my concern, as my concern was the man who sat in front of her. He was also wearing a cap, and just as I strained my eyes at him and focused, a name popped into my head.

“Anand.”

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Chapter 11

The name rolled off my tongue and escaped as a whisper. As I stood there and watched Anand talk to Maya, there was no denying that it was him since he still had the blue suit he wore in the courtroom on him. The only difference was that he had removed his tie, giving himself a little breathing space.

I was looking at him when my legs went numb, and I couldn't take a step forward. I could not even say a word as my tongue was tied. The only parts of me that functioned properly were my eyes, which I was using to see, and my brain, which was processing a thousand thoughts in a single second.

How did I miss this?

The more I asked myself and the deeper my brain tried to process an answer, the harder it got. There was no way I could have suspected that Anand was after the vault in my custody.

What were his plans?

I asked myself, and the only thing I could picture was Anand getting the items in the vault and leaving me behind to bear the consequences.

A thought popped into my mind, and it sounded like something that could happen. It could be that Anand reached out to Maya to set up something as a surprise for me, but that could easily be ruled out since Anand was pissed at me.

It could very well be that Maya reached out to Anand too in an attempt to get to know more about me, but it sure wasn't that.

She couldn't set up my best friend to frame him either. She had texted me and told me to be there, and there she was, with my supposed best friend, Anand.

"Sir." The female attendant's voice reached my ears, and I turned around, snapping out of my reverie.

"What would you like to get, sir?" asked the lady.

"Uh," I said as I began to brainstorm. I wondered how I was going to approach my friend and confront him. It was very sad that the two people in my life who were very special and helped me keep my sh*t together were working together to ruin my life and reputation.

"I'll get a medium coffee, please. You can add whatever you think I'll like," I answered, as I made a quick turn back to the two people I was keeping my eyes on.

"Alright, sir. I'll be with you in a minute," said the lady as she moved away from the counter.

Then, I began to think of what I would say to him when I approached him. I couldn't come up with anything, and the next question that lingered in my head was whether I should call the cops. That would not be so good, seeing that it would only bring shame and disgrace to not only Anand but also me.

"Here you go, sir!" said the lady, and I turned to her.

I paid for the coffee and told her to keep the change. I picked up the coffee that had a medium temperature and walked towards Anand and Maya, shuffling through the tables and chairs, continuously repeating the word "excuse me" to those who had their chairs in the way.

Finally, I was a few paces away from where they sat, and all I wanted to do was first bury a punch in the face of Anand. I didn't know I was already boiling with so much anger until I got closer, and his face was now in proper view.

As I got closer, I began to hear some low muttering between the two of them. Aside from the redhead wig Maya wore, all her outfits were black. Anand was the first to spot me as I walked into his line of sight. I reached the table and slammed the coffee in the plastic cup on the table, causing them both to go silent.

“What’s going on here, Anand?” I asked with a squeezed face. “Is this the meeting you’ve been ranting about?”

“Hey, Rahul. What are you doing here?” asked Anand with a pretentious smile. “Shouldn’t you be with your wife?”

He kept asking the questions, and just as he was about to get up, I placed my hand on his shoulder and pushed him back to his seat.

“I see you’ve met Maya.” I tried again to get him to talk, but he was adamant.

“Well, I mean, you’ve got...”

“Why do you want the codes, Anand?” I asked bluntly.

Anand’s face had turned red, and even he knew that he was in trouble. He also wore a face that screamed that he was shocked by the fact that I had come to know of his main mission.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, don’t even play pretend with me as though you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

He waited a while before he turned his face toward Maya and said, “I thought you were a professional in this field.”

“Hey! Look at me. You no longer have any business with her,” I said, fury in my voice.

“Yes, I intend to get the code, and yes, I want to steal the gold in the vault. You’re such a fool, Rahul. Anand finally summoned the courage and began to say, “You hold such powerful keys to

financial freedom in your hands, and you won't use them. Since you're that dumb, I choose to use it for you."

"Dang it! I was indeed a fool for not knowing I'd been calling a crook my best friend all this while."

"Who are you calling a crook?" asked Anand as he forced himself out of his chair. He must have felt very uncomfortable as I looked at him from a higher position. On the other hand, Maya only sat and watched as two friends engaged in a brawl.

"I don't have the time to go on and on with a low life like you," said Anand as he pushed back the chair. At this point, everyone's eyes were on us, and they all watched us, hoping a fight would transpire.

"It's okay. I don't have anything to say to you either. If not for our friendship, I wouldn't hesitate to call the police on you."

"...and I won't hesitate to shoot you in the head if you don't tell me what the last code is."

Anand pulled out a pistol from his back, pointed it at me, and cocked it. The whole environment went chaotic, and even though it was an open place, he didn't hesitate or fidget in any way.

"What's the last code?" screamed Anand as he looked both ways. I imagined he was trying to ensure he had enough time to get away before the police arrived.

"It's forty-two. Please don't shoot him," screamed Maya.

"What the heck, Maya?" I shouted as I turned back to face her.

"Thank you, Maya. Your job here is done. Anand relaxed his hand, turned around, and ran towards his car. The people who had hidden under the table got out and started murmuring. Many of them were fidgeting as they watched me and Maya.

"Did you get it?" I asked Maya.

“Like a goat’s neck locked between a lion’s jaw.”

That afternoon, after the confrontation with Anand, I was restless. The constant question in my mind was when I’d be free of all my problems and have some breathing room. Everything seemed to be happening all at once, and I didn’t know which one to face first.

It wasn’t just which one to face first; there was also the probability that I wouldn’t handle the situation well. There is every possibility that I screw up the whole thing.

I shifted on the sofa, adjusting myself again and again. Not because the leather wasn’t comfortable, but because of the nervousness that was eating me up from within. I continually tapped my feet on the ground as a defense mechanism to try to reduce the tension.

I thought of Diya and Hridya, and what I really felt I wanted was to be with them. I had promised them that I would return, but there I was in Maya’s hotel. She had insisted I follow her to her place, as she claimed I needed to clear my head. It was true, though. I even kept the events of the meeting away from her for personal reasons, and though it felt odd, some part of me thought it was the right thing to do.

Maya walked in with two bottles of beer from the kitchen and stretched her hand out, offering me a bottle. The cap was already open, so I just turned the bottle and filled my throat with the contents of the bottle.

Maya sat beside me on the sofa and rested her head on my shoulder. For some reason, I wanted to resist it and probably get off the sofa. I might have gotten out of the room and back to my house, but I didn’t. I willed myself to remain seated and even put my hands around her neck.

“It’s okay,” said Maya. “Everything will be fine.”

I didn’t give a response, but all I did was look into her eyes. She maintained the gaze, and slowly, she leaned in for a kiss. Just as our faces were a hair’s breadth away from each other, a loud bang came on the door.

Maya paused and turned to face the door, her demeanor changing instantly into a stern one. Something in me told me exactly who it could be, but I shrugged it off at first.

“You ordered something?” I asked with urgency in my voice.

“If that’s the way delivery guys knock in Dubai, yes, I did,” she answered.

She got up from the chair and took careful steps towards the door, remaining stealthy. I was frozen in the chair as I stared at the door in front of me to my left.

“Who’s...”

Maya was still talking when the sound of bullets being sprayed filled the air of the corridor. The bullets tore through the wooden door, but skillfully, Maya was quick to react as she lay on the ground. Without wasting any time, she crawled swiftly away from the door into a corner where the bullets could not penetrate.

When the sound of a bullet reached my ear, I didn’t make the mistake of being told what to do but swiftly jumped over the sofa. Maya grabbed onto the white wall of the room, and as I peered at her, I saw her gesturing for me to come close to her.

I didn’t hesitate and speedily rushed to her. Her facial expression was void of fear of any kind as she stood stoically.

“Get to the room!” whispered Maya. It was clear she wasn’t going to repeat herself, and instead of obeying her, I stood firmly. I

knew I could protect myself if I needed to.

The shooting stopped, and there was a loud bang on the door.

“Body slam,” we both said, and we looked at each other. I could tell three men were coming in our direction with the sounds of approaching feet. The one thing I also noticed was that the men had forgotten to reload their guns too, as they only stormed in like they were in charge.

Since Maya was the one in front, she was the first to react. I didn’t bother struggling with her since I knew very well that protecting herself was her profession.

The first man stepped into view, and the first thing she did was grab hold of the gun, which turned out to be just what I thought it was. It was an assault rifle, an ASM 10.

She pushed the gun aside, and the man, dressed in all black with his face covered with a mask as though he wanted to go rob a bank, pulled at the trigger. The bullets fired blankly, and after the third bang, the gun was empty. Holding the gun with both hands, she pushed it into his forehead, causing him to scream. Simultaneously, she drove her knee up into his groin, and his scream turned into a painful grunt within a split second.

The second man who was still behind began to fire at her, but she used the man in front of her as a human shield. She removed the other magazine from the man’s belt and reloaded his rifle. Her speed was incredible, and before the other man could finish processing his thoughts, she shot at him, burying a bullet in his chest.

I was stunned by how fast she moved, though I had expected a little bit of action. She let go of the man, who was now adorned with bullet holes all over his chest, and he dropped to the ground lifelessly. Her breathing was heavy as she turned to look at me, blood dripping from her hand.

Slowly, her expressionless face turned into a smile as she looked at me. I was certain the blood wasn't hers but that of the man who was now dead. She was still in the way of the door when I remembered I had counted three footsteps.

The sound of a shoe making a squeaking sound reached my ears, and I was certain there was another shooter. Just in time, I jumped forward, pinning Maya down to the ground, and the sound of spraying bullets filled the air milliseconds after we collided with the ground. Maya pushed me off her quickly, and then she turned around, picked up the rifle on the ground, and pulled the trigger.

Both of our breathing was ragged as the last few minutes we just had were unexpected. We didn't expect such an adrenaline rush. We didn't need anyone to explain why we just got attacked, as the reason was very visible.

"He figured!" said Maya.

"Oh goodness. I can't believe he still went ahead to try and open the vault."

"He's ill-tempered already, Rahul," added Maya. "He's gone too far and can't turn back now."

I sat up and placed my face on my palm, completely thrown into distress wished nothing had gone wrong with my marriage in the first place. If everything was still right, then I wouldn't be such a mess. It was then that the thoughts of the dead body encroached into my mind. What are we going to do about them?

"What are we going to do with—" I was still saying when I raised my head and realized Maya was gone. A thrilling chill was sent down my spine, and my heart began to race.

"Where are you, Maya?" I called out again, already panicking. "Maya!"

“What’s wrong?” called out Maya, her voice escaping from the room. I sighed deeply in relief but then stormed into the room to confirm that she was actually still there.

“What’s wrong?” asked Maya hurriedly.

“What are you doing?” I asked. She was going around the room, putting a couple of clothes in her black bag.

“Getting out of here”

“Are we just going to leave the men in the room?” I asked, disturbed by the situation.

Maya paused and moved closer to me, saying, “Rahul, I’m a spy, and I have no relations with the police. We could have waited to report the situation as an assassination attempt, but I’ll probably only get arrested.”

“Oh!” exclaimed I, in realization.

“You could stay and attend to the policemen that would come, but I’m sure more men are going to stream into this building any moment from now on. So, let’s get out of here.”

She didn’t wait for me to respond, as she quickly grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the room. We walked briskly past the dead men at the entrance of her hotel room and into the empty corridor. After looking both ways, we began to walk towards the elevator. Just a few steps to the elevator, and the elevator dinged and the doors parted ways.

Staring back at us, eye to eye, were two men dressed like the first group of men that had stormed our room. We stopped sharply in our tracks, and, seeing us, the two men reached for the back of their jeans and pulled out a pistol, each with a silencer in their mouth. Quickly, I pulled at Maya’s top, and we ran sideways with our heads bowed. We pushed open the door that led to the stairs of the building and began to race down the flight of stairs.

All the while, we were being shot at, but we were lucky enough to not get hit. Looking back while still running down the wards, we were being chased by the men. On getting to the ground floor, the door flung open as a pistol came into view. I went for the pistol first and strengthened my grip on the man's hand. I pushed the hand into the wall, and the man himself came into view. I used my elbow to hit the man's head and acrobatically placed the man on my back, throwing him off into the wall. The man grunted loudly in pain as he held onto his back. The pistol remained in my hand, and I pointed it at him. She took the pistol from me, and we dashed out of the stairwell into the hotel's open reception area. We walked slowly at first, but the moment we heard the slamming of the staircase door, we sprinted for the glass exit door.

The sound of bullets being fired at our backs was enough motivation to get us to run. A red Ferrari had just parked in front of the hotel, and a young and handsome man stepped out of the car. As though I could read Maya's mind, I knew we were going to hijack the car. In the corner of my eyes, I spotted a black GLE SUV still fired up just a few meters away. It was clear that it was the ride of those who were sent after us.

Skillfully, Maya hauled herself over the bonnet of the red Ferrari, supporting herself with a hand on the bonnet. The young man who owned the car was furious and raised his hands in protest, but Maya was less concerned. She pushed him away and jumped into the car. I followed suit and entered the passenger's seat.

She turned on the engine and, without thinking twice, hit the gas and accelerated into the driveway. The adrenaline rush that kept pumping in my head didn't even let me admire the beauty and complex configuration of the inside of the Ferrari. I looked out the window as we were about to leave the compound, and just as I had imagined, there was the black SUV behind us, chasing us. The sun was setting already, and the day was drawing to an end.

It wasn't long before we found ourselves on the freeway.

"Where to?" asked Maya as she kept her eyes fixed on the road, swerving right and left and speeding past cars. The SUV that was on our trail got closer, and there was no hope of losing them.

"Lose the SUV first," I said in a rush.

"Okay," she said with a smirk, and we hit the gas as we traveled faster.

A few seconds later, just in front of us, we spotted traffic before an intersection due to the red light, and there was no way we could escape getting caught. Or so I thought, but not Maya. Reacting faster, she hit the brakes and drifted, turning the car and then climbing the elevated pavement that was meant to keep the cars on their side of the road. The front of the car was damaged, but the aim was achieved as we had successfully ditched the SUV in the other lane.

They couldn't follow us since they were trapped by a car to their left. Just like that, we were out of reach of the thugs that were sent after me. From there, Maya drove rather slowly since we weren't being chased anymore. I knew I needed a place to think, and it had to be somewhere quiet. I had to make a decision fast; otherwise, Anand was going to have my head.

"Where to now?" asked Maya again.

I wasn't sure. I had no clue as to where to go. The thought of Hridya and Diya popped into my mind, and I couldn't get them off my mind. Since Anand didn't get me, I had a feeling he was going to go after my family, so I punched my address into the GPS.

"Go there!" said I.

My heart began to beat faster as I sat there, hoping and praying in all manner of ways so that I could imagine that both Hridya

and Diya were kept safe. I knew very well that they would have been wondering where I was since I promised I was going to be back soon.

I pulled out my phone after I couldn't wait any longer and then dialed a number on my phone.

"This is the Dubai police department. What's your emergency?" asked the feminine voice on the other end of the call.

„Uhm, I've got criminal activity to report, and I need assistance at this location as soon as possible."

"What location is that?" asked the voice.

I quickly called out my address to them, and the feminine voice reassured me that they were sending units to the apartment soon.

It was already dark, as the sun had gone down. After a few minutes, we arrived at my house, and I asked Maya to drive slowly and keep a low profile. Just as we got closer to my compound, an SUV drove right in front of us in a rush.

"Step out of the car!" screamed the driver as he got down and pointed a pistol at me through the windshield.

Just then, three more men got down from the back of the SUV with rifles in their hands, surrounding the car. Maya and I remained seated in the car. Slowly, the front passenger's door opened up, and Anand got down from the seat. He walked towards the side of the car and, using a pistol, tapped on the window of the car. Out of the blue, just like a camouflaged chameleon, a group of policemen, approximately a dozen of them, jumped out of their hiding place and aimed their AK47 rifles at the thugs. It was at that point that Anand realized he was trapped.

The thugs were seized and thrown into the police van. Anand was also handcuffed and put in the back seat of a police car, where he was going to get a personal escort to jail. One of the

officers walked towards me and asked for the tape recording I claimed was available, and I removed it from my pocket.

I clicked on the button, and the recording played back the voice of Anand, where he said,

“Yes, I intend to get the code, and yes, I want to steal the gold in the vault. You’re such a fool, Rahul. You hold such powerful keys to financial freedom in your hands, and you won’t use them. Since you’re that dumb, I choose to use it for you.”

I placed it in his palms. “Very well,” said the officer as he reached for the recording. “Thanks for calling this in.”

“No, thanks for saving me,” I said.

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Chapter 12

I got back into the car and closed the door in a very slow manner. I rested my back on the seat and placed one of my hands on my head as I processed what had just happened. My so-called best friend was just after my life, with guns pointed at the back of my head everywhere I went. We couldn't even resolve it, so I had to turn him in to the officials. I knew that was one hell of a thing to ponder.

A hand reached out and patted me on the back, moving back and forth. Maya was in the car all the while and didn't even get out of it. She was seated right there in the driver's seat as she watched as they took Anand away.

"I'm really sorry it had to happen this way, baby," said Maya.

I shook my head and said, "It's alright. It's fine. He came at me, and he got what he deserved."

"Okay."

We both sat there and stared into the distance. The air was a little tense, and there was a little awkwardness in the air. Maya stole glances at me, and when she got tired of the awkward silence, she decided to break the silence.

"So..." said Maya.

"I've been thinking," I started, interrupting her. "I owe you a big thanks."

"No, you don't," said Maya, with a big, broad smile on her face.

"Thank you. Thanks for not giving me away," I appreciated.

After I had thought of sending Anand to jail, it was then that I realized I wouldn't have done any of what I did if she hadn't decided to help me. Though it was true that I was the one who figured she was a spy, she already made a recording I was going to find of her confessing her love for me and the truth about her identity.

"It's nothing," insisted Maya, but I wasn't going to just let it go like that.

"You know what? Can you drive us to a restaurant?" I asked in a high-pitched tone.

There was a sudden urge in me to cheer up and not let the capture of Anand bother me. It felt as though I had so many things to worry about, and I just wanted to clear my head.

"I do not know a restaurant, but I'm pretty sure the GPS does. But won't you... never mind?"

I chuckled at her first sentence, and the second one got me curious. I had an idea of what she wanted to ask me, but I wasn't in the mood for it. I had thought of going into my compound just a few feet away to meet Hridya and Diya, but I wasn't ready to handle another rollercoaster of emotions. While the drive took a couple of minutes, I used the opportunity to tell Maya how good her fighting skills were. We talked at length, and even when we got to the restaurant, we wouldn't stop talking. We successfully pushed the topic of Anand out of our conversation.

The restaurant was very luxurious, and I couldn't remember when I last treated Hridya to a dinner date of such high caliber. I felt guilty, but the feeling was quickly washed away with the expensive champagne we were having. There was nothing better than the dish we had just had. It was falafel, a deep-fried ball or patty composed of ground chickpeas or fava beans, that was delicious. This was one of Dubai's most popular foods that people enjoy, and we decided to have it.

“How’s your vacation going?” I asked as I put the last spoon of falafel in my mouth.

Maya chuckled a little before she gave an answer: “I’m not sure. I wouldn’t say it has gone well so far since I had to work, but that’s very much okay. Although, I’m going to say that I’m having quite a lot of fun at the moment.”

I chuckled lowly and then raised my bottle of wine and said, “To a happy and fulfilled vacation.”

“And to us,” added Maya with a smile.

There was the cling of bottle against bottle, and we took a sip from the cups.

“To us,”

The melodious voice played the critical words again and again in my head, and no matter how hard I tried to get rid of them, they only lingered more. Her smile was also the only thing I could see, and it felt as though I was indeed being blinded by love.

“You’re beautiful,” I commented, in the sexiest voice I have ever manufactured.

Blood filled up her cheeks as the words that I spoke hit the right spots in her heart. Her smile was captivating, and waning felt like something that was light years away from her. As if beckoning me, she placed her hand on the table, and sincerely, I knew it was a sign for me. I reached out for her hand, and as though it were the first time I had touched her, I felt a thrill down my spine.

My feelings for Maya were undefined, and that gave me so many headaches. At some point, it felt as though my words were now revolving around her, and all of a sudden, my head seemed to be uncertain about the situation. There were times when I felt absolutely nothing for her, and then the next minute, I couldn’t get her out of my mind.

My skepticism all began on that day when I found out that the girl I thought was my world was actually a spy who was coming after my life. Even with that, I still sat at a dinner table with her, claiming my undying love was hers to own.

I felt my hands being squeezed back while on the table, and it only kept me on edge. I looked up into Maya's eyes, and at that moment, I was entranced.

"I love you, Rahul." The words rang in my head over and over again, and I couldn't push them out of my head. She was so in love with me that she kept saying it over and over again. Looking into her eyes, I could see no iota of doubt.

We held that gaze for a while as she waited, her hands still in mine. She was most definitely waiting for me to say it back, but I must say I tried. I just wanted to force it out, even though I was wallowing in uncertainty, but nothing came out.

I gave a weak chuckle, retracted my hand, and then said, "Let's go get you a place to sleep." That I said with my voice rich in care and concern, and it was enough to make her give a small smile.

After paying for the bills, we got back into the Ferrari that wasn't ours and zoomed off. It wasn't long after we left the restaurant that we got to another hotel. We booked a room, and, just like back in Italy, we walked down the corridor, holding hands.

My heart was beating faster than it ever had. The adrenaline rush in my blood was at its peak, but I was divided. I wasn't sure I could handle the rising energy. Something was pulling me back from the lurking action I was about to perform, and I couldn't just wave it off. Believe me, I tried, but I still felt trapped. I was trapped in a past I couldn't escape from.

As we walked down the corridor, images of Hridya walking down the aisle flashed before my eyes, and no matter how hard I tried to push it away, it just felt clearer. I shut my eyes at a point,

burying myself in the utter darkness I was provided, and Maya's touch on my clear skin pulled me out of the darkness.

Just as though it were a replay, I was with the card to open the suite, and she walked right in front of me and rested on the door. She then wrapped her hands around my neck and pulled my head closer to hers. I was completely distracted, and my head wasn't in the right place. A wave of strange feelings washed through my bones, causing me to shiver like never before.

I was sure she felt it. My reluctance to move closer to her The hesitation that was building up to touching her She pulled my head closer to hers, but I didn't react. I still tried to open the door, but seeing that I was trapped in her arms, it was proving difficult. Our heads touched gently, then our noses graced each other's, but that was as far as we could go. The door opened, and it caused both of us to stagger and almost fall backwards.

Somehow, I managed to hold her in place before she could fall out of my reach. This prompted a swift motion that caught me completely off guard. She pulled my head to hers and planted her lips on mine. Her lips were as juicy as I could remember, but something caused me to feel repelled by them, although I didn't pull back. Meanwhile, the door had closed behind us.

Still kissing as she did it passionately, I helped her to her feet, and she wouldn't let me go. She grabbed onto me and pulled me closer, causing her breasts to be felt by my chest. Her fingers combed my hair with so much passion, and I figured I had to replicate it. I let my hands move over her back, and before I knew it, I was overtaken by the pleasure.

Soon, her top was up, and I began to caress her smooth back gently. I used one of my hands to carry her and bury her in the depths of pleasure. I broke the contact between our lips and went straight for her neck, kissing it in the steamiest way I could think of.

At that point, I could tell she was already wet underneath, and the beast I had unleashed couldn't be tamed. I turned from standing and pushed her to the sofa close by. Even at that moment, the color of the sofa was unknown to me. I climbed on top of her, and she was quick to remove my shirt. We grabbed onto each other, and I could feel her hand already reaching for my trousers.

Just like a wildfire, my mind got encroached on by the thoughts and pictures of Hridya and Diya. That caused me to slow down. I looked into Maya's face, and it was suddenly replaced by that of Hridya, and I was shocked to my bones.

I stopped and looked away again, and this time, it was Diya that I saw, standing just a few feet away from us with tears in her eyes and the teddy that I bought for her. I was thrown into oblivion as what was happening was strange to me.

"What's wrong?" asked Maya, figuring out that something was wrong.

"Nothing. It's just..." she said, but quickly stopped.

I got off her and pulled my trousers back up, and she followed suit, pulling her top back down. I couldn't even look at her face as she tried to hold me.

"It's okay. I'm here with you, baby," said Maya, and that caused me to lose it.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" I said with both anger and anguish. "You're always doing that. Calling me Baby just to trap me here with you. Stop it."

Slowly, she moved back, removing her hand from my legs. She was now on the floor, resting her back on the sofa while I sat on it. My head was in my palm as I remained numb, feeling guilty for all the things that I had done.

“I’m sorry, Rahul. I thought we had a mutual feeling for each other,” said Maya amidst sobs.

“We do. We did, Maya. I just don’t know what is wrong with me.”

I could tell she had broken down from the gentle and subtle sobs that emitted from where she sat. She was a delicate girl, and I felt I had broken her. How a spy fell in love with me was still a mystery to me, but it was certain that she did anyway. I got down from the sofa and dragged myself towards her. I pulled her closer, hugging her in a tight ball, and she kept sniffing. We remained like that for a couple more minutes until she tried to kiss me again.

“No, Maya. Don’t,” said I as I stared nakedly into her teary eyes.

I felt a stab in my heart, but I couldn’t keep up with the guilt.

“I’m still married legally to Hridya, and this is not to be heard of.” I swallowed hard and then continued. “I love you. You know I love Maya, but I love Hridya. Maybe more than I do love you, and the crazy thing is, I’ve tied the knot with her. I’m sorry for dragging you into all this.”

Her eyes were heavy as the tears flowed freely down her cheek. It was the most emotional feeling I had ever experienced, as I even had to look her in the eye as I said every single word. Love is crazy sometimes. Love is stupid sometimes. And most of all, love can be impossible. Then it hit me hard. Or maybe it’s just the misinterpretation of love, which apparently was lust.

“I...” started Maya, but she stopped at the first word to clean her teary eyes. She then moved away a little and took a deep breath too. “I fell in love for the very first time, and it happens to be you, Rahul. This is not me. This is just love turning me into a dummy. Love is meant to make me strong and all, but maybe I chose the wrong side of love.”

She paused, and before she continued, it felt like forever. The guilt in me kept eating up all the good parts of me, and I could just collapse. It was way too much.

“I felt—I felt you were pulling away too. Immediately after you discovered who I was, you changed your attitude towards me, though I do not blame you. It’s all on me. I knew this wasn’t going to last either since you had another life of your own. You have a wife, and you also have a daughter, and there’s no way you’re going to abandon them for me. That’s for sure. Not now that she has refused to carry on with the court case.”

I was shocked by the sentence she ended with. How she figured that out is a mystery, but all that matters is that she understood the outcome. I searched my mind for the words to say, but nothing came.

“I don’t want to drag you into my life. You won’t fit in,” continued Maya as she chuckled. “You know, I’m actually on the run?” asked Maya.

“Well, I figured,” I said.

She chuckled, and with a smirk on her face, she said, “I do not wish to argue that with you since you’re a master detective yourself.”

Slowly, I began to loosen up as a smile crept onto my face. “You’re a badass spy too. A great one indeed.”

“You think?”

“I know,” I said, drawing out the words.

“Thank you.”

Just then, my phone began to ring, and our attention was divided. We couldn’t find it at first but later found it on the couch. The person was calling the second time, seeing that I didn’t pick up

the call the first time. It was Hridya.

“Hello,” I said, putting the phone close to my ear. I had the option to leave the sitting room and find somewhere quiet, but I didn’t. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to create more tension between Maya and me.

“Where are you, Rahul? We’ve been waiting for you all night, and just now, Diya just went to bed after her desperation to see you.”

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry. I should call you.”

“Yeah, you should have done that! I even tried to call Anand, but his phone was switched off.”

“Oh yeah, it is. Don’t worry, Maya. I’m alright,” said I

“Are you sure, Rahul?” asked Hridya.

Her persistent questions and trying to figure out if I was alright brought a broad smile to my face that I couldn’t even hide from Maya. I tried to, but it was very easy to spot. Even at that, I could see her smiling back at me.

“Don’t worry. First thing tomorrow, I’ll be the one to wake up Diya. Is that okay?”

“Well, I guess so,” answered Hridya. “Good night then!”

“Bye,” I said, after so much contemplation.

She cut the call, and I was still smiling at how much she cared about me. I knew it was the tension between us that caused her not to ask me where I was. Maya’s look at me caused me to chuckle a little as I asked her, “What?”

“You really do love her, don’t you?” asked Maya sternly.

“I do,” I said, after taking my time to think about the question.

Maya chuckled. “Well, you didn’t have to answer the question as though I was asking you to marry me.”

I joined her in her laughter, and the room fell silent again after a while.

“So, what now?” I asked after what felt like an eternity.

“Um, I think my vacation is over. It’s not what I dreamt of, but I have to stay clear of you for a great while.”

“Ouch! I actually wish I could sponsor your stay here.”

“Are you sure you can do that? Trust me, you’re going to go broke.”

“Your confidence scares me!” I said it with a smirk.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve got a bigger bag than you do,” said Maya.

“I’m not going to argue that with you either. You’re a spy.”

“Oh, it’s good you know that.”

Just like that, we chatted into the night, and all the tension that had been building up initially dissipated. She made plans to leave Dubai soon, as she didn’t arrive in a stealthy manner. She was scared that she was all over the place and must have been noticed by some of her enemies. She booked a morning ticket for a plane that would fly her out of the country as early as six in the morning.

Around five a.m., her ride arrived, and I followed her to the airport. We waited at the airport for her flight to be called, and when it was time, she was ready to go. I gave her one last hug. A warm and long one that would make her remember me for a long time. When she was out of sight, I boarded a taxi that took me home.

At the front of my compound’s gate, I stayed and stared intently

at the spot where Anand was arrested. I felt a pain in my heart for losing my best friend, but when it dawned on me again that he was planning to kill me, all the empathy I had for him was washed away.

I made my way into the compound and to my door. After knocking on the door for the third time, I finally got a response. Hridya was still upstairs in our room, but she had to rush down the stairs to get to the door.

When she pulled the door backwards, I was puzzled at the picture that stood in front of me. She was in her nightgown, but her hair was really rough, and there was a line of hair in her mouth. Both I and she were dumbfounded and had nothing to say. She moved out of the way to allow me to walk in.

When she did, I still turned to her and stared intensely into her eyes.

“Rahul,” said Hridya, breathing out deeply.

“Hridya,” I introduced myself.

We were both in a state of confusion. As for me, I didn’t think there was going to be an awkward moment at the door, and neither could she have imagined it.

“Is she awake?” I asked.

“Who’s awake?”

“Diya, of course,” said I. I went on to realize who she thought it could also be that I was asking about. I went on to rule out the idea from her head: “Oh no, definitely not your mother.”

“She’s not here again. My mother. She left yesterday very early after the court meeting. “

“Oh! That’s new.”

“And good too,” added Hridya as she made her way up the stairs. “Come on. She’s still in bed, but you can wake her up.”

When she said that, I closely followed. Getting to the door, she opened it to reveal a sleeping Diya. The teddy I had given her the day before was right by her bedside, as she was tucked in very well. I went closer to the bedside and watched as my little angel took in gentle breaths. Once again, I was happy to be very close to my daughter.

“She’s got to be in school today.” I asked, and her mother gave a nod, saying yes.

“Alright then,” I answered, as I stared intently at the sleeping Diya.

After a couple of minutes, Hridya called me and asked us to talk outside the room. We went down to the sitting room, knowing fully well that going into our room would be too much for both of us to take in. After we were both settled in the sitting room, she then began to think of a way to start the conversation. I then decided to help her since I knew I also had some things to say on my own path.

“I’m sorry, Hridya,” I said with caution in my voice. “I’m also guilty of all that has happened, Hridya, and I’m so sorry. During this past week, my ways were not exactly clean, and I’ve come to realize that I myself am not exempt from the blame for what happened between us.”

“You shouldn’t say that. I should be the one making the apology here. It’s so sad how I let my grandmother blindfold me and then push me in every direction that she wished. I was used in my own husband’s house, and I was blinded by it. I’m sorry I went ahead with the divorce thingy. It was stupid of me,” explained Hridya.

“I guess we both know our faults then,” I deduced, and Hridya nodded in affirmation.

From there, we took it upon ourselves to get back together, but not immediately. We initially made a plan for a year, but after the first two months, our love for each other had grown stronger than it initially was. Also, the week where I went on the journey to find Maya made me realize that life is short and I have to live it if I have the money.

From there, I bought a new apartment, and we moved in. It was much bigger and fancier, but regardless, I had the money, and it wasn't a big deal. I also got Hridya a car on her birthday and took her on dates frequently, finally strengthening the bond of our relationship.

Anand was completely out of my life, and the last I heard, he was serving ten years in prison for attempting to steal the government's gold.

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Chapter 13

Three years had passed, and it was the events of just a week that had shaped my life into what it had become. I was now living in Palm Jumeirah, still in Dubai. My apartment was by the waterfront, with an amazing view. I was standing on the balcony on a sunny Saturday with a bowl of ice cream in my hand, watching the amazing view my money bought me.

“Honey! Your phone,” called out Hridya.

“I’m coming, babe, hold on,” I answered as I left the balcony and made my way through the glass opening that led me directly to the kitchen.

I had previously been working in the kitchen with my laptop before I decided that a break would do just fine. My phone and laptop were on the counter, and my wife was busy making us lunch. I got to the counter just in time, with a few seconds to spare, and then picked up my phone to see an anonymous number calling.

As a tech genius and in the profession I had, it wasn’t a random thing to receive calls from anonymous numbers. Almost immediately, my mood switched, and I was alert. My wife, who I thought was busy cooking, had noticed my change in demeanor and quickly turned to see the outcome.

“Who’s that?” inquired Hridya.

“I have to pick up the call first.”

With that said, I picked up the call, and the voice of a Mexican was transmitted through the phone. The voice was deep and coarse, and that spooked me.

“Rahul, we’ve got Maya.”

At those words, thousands of light bulbs were lit simultaneously in my head. Hridya was smart enough to also understand what was about to transpire, so she made her way quickly to my side. I dropped the phone on the slab, and, without responding to the voice, I began to track the call on my system. My phone was connected already, so it made my work easier.

“Rahul!” called out the voice one more time.

“Who are you, and what do you want from her?” I asked in the bravest voice I could come up with.

“Check the video,” answered the voice.

“What video?”

Just then, my phone beeped, and a video came in. My wife picked up the phone in my place, seeing that I was occupied with the tracking, and clicked on the video. There was a loud noise in the background of the video, but that didn’t matter, seeing that there was something else that gave me more concern.

Right there, tied to two chairs, were a woman and a child. The woman was completely bound, and even her mouth was covered with duct tape. It was Maya. Her face was bruised, and there was blood on her head. Her hair was scattered, and it was clear she had been beaten. The tape was removed from her mouth with so much effort that it caused me to cringe.

“Say it,” another Mexican voice said in a harsh tone.

“I’m so sorry, Rahul. I should have reached out to you. They’ve got your son.”

With that, the video went back to the face of the boy, and that was the end of the video.

“So, you have the guts to fuck my girl, eh? Well, I believe you see how fucked you are now.”

And right about then, the call ended, leaving me puzzled and thrown into a state of oblivion. What just happened was the only question someone who wasn’t in my wife’s space would ask.

Maya had a son for me, and she never reached out. I recognized that voice very well, and I was certain it was the voice from the voice note Maya first sent to me three years ago. Now she was in the custody of the man, whom, if I can recall, she called Carlos. Maya wasn’t news to Hridya, and I was very happy that she didn’t have to find out that way. Although I know Maya had a son for me, it was a big deal.

“Did you get it?” asked Hridya.

“I was close. “Italy, Rome,” I replied, staring at my screen. “That’s all I’ve got.”

“Well, we can work with that.”

“We can?” I asked, but before she could answer the question, another video came in, and it was that of a bomb being strapped to Maya. The man who did the video showed his face, then showed the remote to detonate the bomb, and then dropped it in his black jacket.

It was then that I realized that there was fire on the mountain. What the call and video meant was for me to try and come save Maya and the son I never knew I had. It was a challenge I was willing to accept. It had been a while since I had gone on an adventure. I was furious, though, and scared as I watched the video over and over again.

“Yes, we do. I know what you’re thinking, and I’m coming with you.”

“I... I wasn’t going to ask you to stay back.”

“Better. So, what do we have?”

It was as though we were both waiting for a real-life challenge. Though it wasn’t like the movies and documentaries we watched, A life was at stake here, and I had to be very sure of every move that I took.

“Well, like I said, I’ve got nothing more than Rome,” I mentioned, looking all confused but with less worry written all over my face.

“Okay. Play the video again,” instructed Hridya.

After watching the video twice, I still had nothing, and I just couldn’t understand why she wanted me to play the video. She then took the phone from me and watched the video again for the third time.

“I got it.”

“What’s that?”

„We’ve been trying to see something all this time. Why not try to hear something?”

“Oh shoot! That’s brilliant,” I said after watching the video again. “There’s so much noise, and that means that they will be very close to an event or a loud place.”

“Exactly. Now, what we have to do is know the “loud places” in Rome.”

After I searched out the places, there were six areas. We concluded that it was quite a lot, and we needed to streamline the location. We had nothing else to work with but the video, so we kept watching. Just then, I realized I could actually blur out some of the sounds and listen to some conversations. After I did that, it wasn’t long before the word “Pantheon” surfaced.

“Awesome!” commended my wife.

“I just followed in your footsteps,” I explained.

After I googled Pantheon on the map, the location came up, and as expected, there were more than fifty buildings at close range, with more than two hundred apartments. After doing some thinking, Hridya tried to book an apartment around the area online, and tens of free apartments came up. Then, without thinking too much, she found out that three of them had recently been booked.

“Perfect, Hridya. “You’ll make a fine detective, you know,” I said, with a grin on my face.

She smiled at me in return and then said, “Stop flattering me and get the tickets; we are going to Italy.”

“Damn right, we are,” I replied with a smile. “I already booked the ticket. We would be departing at night around eleven.”

After giving all the details, I took my phone and went out back to the balcony to let the fresh air of the afternoon wash away the worry that was slowly encroaching on my face. I opened the first video and stared into the eyes of Maya. I haven’t heard from her since the day she left, and even after I left her a couple of messages on her Tinder account, it will show that she read them, but she never responded to any of them.

Then, I skipped the video to where it had the face of the boy that was claimed to be mine. With all sincerity, I could see the resemblance. I was sorry it had to happen, but perhaps I was expecting something to happen. I was expecting karma to surface. The boy, of whom I didn’t know his name yet, was the consequence of my wayward act during my week of adventure. After staring at the video for a couple more minutes, I couldn’t sit around anymore.

I made my way into the apartment and called out to Diya. Then I made my way to the room and began to pack my bag and that of Hridya.

“What’s the rush, Daddy?” asked Diya as she entered the room.

“I and your mom are going to Italy by night.”

“But why?” asked Diya.

I stopped and looked at her with emotions filling up my guts.
“To bring your brother home.”

Nightfall felt like an eternity. When it finally came, I think it is right to say that we were the most nervous and impatient passengers to board the plane to Rome. While on the plane, I couldn’t sleep as the thought of Maya filled my mind. It was as if I wanted to go see her for the first time in forever. My wife, on the other hand, took the opportunity to sleep on my shoulder.

After we were three hours into the flight, I decided a rested mind would give me a sharp mind in the morning. Arrival in Rome happened earlier than we had expected, but lucky for us, the man who we wanted to rent an apartment from was willing to get up very early in the morning to take us to the apartment once we were willing to throw in some extra cash.

As early as six thirty, we had an apartment that showed us the perfect view of the Pantheon. We couldn’t make any moves since it was still very early in the morning and any movement wouldn’t be stealthy. Although we kept taking sneak peeks through the window, there was nothing to see. When morning came and the sun was out, so were the tourists and everyone else that wanted to visit the Pantheon. The whole place was buzzing with muttering and chattering as everyone was busy with one thing or another.

Many others were also taking pictures, and there was quite a crowd in front of the building, just the way we wanted it to be.

“Where’s the binoculars?” asked Hridya, looking into the bag we brought.

I had tried to initiate an emotional conversation with her, but she wouldn’t let me. I wanted to apologize all over again for the act that I had committed, but she seemed engrossed in the mission we had taken upon ourselves and also in saving that young boy.

“It’s on the table,” I answered, zipping my brown jacket.

I was all dressed up, with a cap on and sun-shaded glasses. I needed to hide my identity from whoever was watching out for my presence.

“Stay safe, honey.”

“I will.”

With that said, I made my way out of the apartment and blended into the crowd. I looked back up at the window of the apartment that we had rented. I could see a little trace of Hridya holding onto the binoculars.

“You’re in view. Move a little to your right, okay?” instructed I, which she did with no complaint. I had my air pods on, which she also did, and that was what we used to communicate.

With that, I made my way through the crowd, searching for something that would give me a clue as to where they were keeping Maya. I had two main goals. One was to look for the doors leading to the three apartments that had recently been booked, and the other was to look out for odd men. Mexican men.

I was quick to spot the first door, but there was no activity in front of it. I drew out my phone from my pocket and began to take pictures of the buildings, just so I could blend in. I then

took a walk down a path, and then I noticed a white van with two men. The van had been there when we first arrived, but the difference was that two men now sat in front of it, doing nothing. I took a closer look at the men and then guessed.

“Eleven O’clock. White van.”

“I see it,” responded Hridya. “How do we confirm?”

“Standby.”

After saying this, I walked up to a guy who was busy taking pictures with his phone and had a conversation with him. He then agreed to do what I asked him to do, and not long after, he was at the white van taking pictures. From where I stood and stylishly watched, I could see the man in front talking to him in more of an offended demeanor. When the guy returned, he confirmed my suspicion, telling me I was right.

“Hey, in fact, they are Mexicans, and they sounded as though they were hiding something.”

“Alright, thank you.”

I then switched to Hridya and told her we were very correct with our assumption. They were there, and somewhere in those buildings, Maya and the boy waited. I began to watch the second door of the apartment that had just been rented out, and the clue I was looking for was right in front of my eyes.

“Hridya, two men are parading at the front of the door. Look closely. “

“You’re right,” confirmed Hridya after a few seconds.

Almost simultaneously, a man opened the door of the apartment and walked out. He spoke to the two people parading the area, and I could only guess that he asked them to remain sharp. He then gave the keys to one of the men, and the man dropped the key into his pocket. The older man who walked out of the

apartment was the only one I could assume was the boss and probably the one with whom I was on a call. The man walked towards the van and then entered a car with tinted glasses in front of the van. He didn't leave, so I could only assume he was waiting to watch too. I went back to the guy I had spoken with earlier and told him that I needed him to help me pick a pocket.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't act dumb. I saw you when you pulled that guy's wallet out, and not just that, there's a gold watch in your back pocket that doesn't belong to you. Also, let me have my pocketknife back," I said.

I had caught him by the neck, and he then agreed to pick the pocket. He left and was back with the keys in a minute.

"I'm done. not doing anything for you again."

"Oh, you are. Get down here, Hridya," I instructed swiftly.

In a minute, she was with us in the midst of the crowd, and we tried as much as we could to blend in.

"This is the plan; the plan is to get into that building without getting spotted by either those men in front of that door or those men in the van. We need to be as stealthy as possible."

"So, you need a distraction."

"Yes."

"Okay, that will be provided."

Soon, the plan was in motion, and the guy walked towards one of the Mexican men guarding the door. The man was on his phone, so the guy grabbed the phone and then ran. The two guards ran after him, causing a commotion in the midst of the crowd. A police officer who was positioned amid the crowd caught him, but he was quick to announce that it was a prank and that the

whole thing was being filmed. That was the cue, as the door was left unguarded and the men in the car had their eyes on their buddies.

The door gave way once the key was in, and soon we were racing up the stairs without being spotted. Getting to the first floor, I was about to open the first door when Hridya stopped me.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s an alarm wire,” said Hridya, with a grin washed all over her face. I worked on the wire and was able to disconnect it without letting it go off. The room was well arranged with furniture and all, but the presence of the mob in the room was not farfetched. On the table in the kitchen was a bunch of beer bottles, and in the living room was a deck of cards, scattered all around. Even the TV was left on.

“Here, Rahul,” called out Hridya.

I rushed into the room, and lo and behold, Maya was there, tied to a seat just like we saw in the video. There was also a boy tied to a chair.

A stream of tears flowed down her cheek as she cried, creating a muffled noise with her covered mouth. I was just about to rush into the room when Hridya held me back, and then she showed me the thin fishing line that was placed at the lower part of the door. There was another alarm there, and I didn’t need to do any disconnecting. All we did was lift our legs higher to cross, and that was all we needed to do.

Getting close to Maya, I worked on the ropes, and after I had loosed them, Maya almost fell off the chair. She was extremely weak and could barely stand on her own. I slowly removed the tape from her mouth, and even as she tried to talk, her words only came out in a whisper.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t talk. It’s okay. I’m here now,” said I.

I turned around to see Hridya staring at both of us as if lost in a trance. She suddenly snapped out of it and moved closer to me, taking Maya from my hand. I then turned around to lose the boy to the ropes, and that was when it dawned on me that the bomb was strapped to the boy. Slowly, as Maya watched in Hridya’s hand, I began to work on the bomb. I made careful and precise moves while trying to remove the wires that wouldn’t cause it to detonate.

I was shaking nervously as beads of sweat flowed down my face. I removed the last wire, and the bomb went dormant. Then, I cut the boy loose and held him tight to me. Even though the boy understood the situation, he held on to me as though he had expected me previously.

“What now? We can’t go out through the roof as planned.” He’s too weak,” revealed Hridya.

I know; just follow me. Soon, we were out of the door and into the corridor. Instead of moving down the stairs through which we came, we went towards another, and right there was another door meant for another owner. I knocked on the door, and when the young woman who lived there saw the state of Maya, she took her in. On the woman’s side of the building was a back door that led away from the main street, where the crowd was always gathered. We then climbed the window, and using the ladder that was placed there, we climbed down to the ground.

Thanking the lady, we made our way back to our rented apartment without getting spotted.

“What now? They’ll only keep coming after us,” asked Maya with her waning voice as she lay helplessly on the bed.

“You leave that to me,” I said as I motioned to the door. “Watch after them, Hridya; I’ll be back shortly.”

I made my way out of our apartment again and into the crowd that had no intention of leaving. I found the guy who helped me with the pickpocketing and gave him a riskier assignment. He disagreed, saying it was too risky, and I volunteered to help out on the mission.

The plan was set into motion, and the guy walked towards the man he had snatched the phone from previously. The man was still furious, so he didn’t entertain him. Then the guy brought out the key to the apartment and gave it to him. The man then lowered his guard and took the key from him. Just when he reached out to take the key, I reached behind him and pulled out the pistol that he had kept at the back of his pistol. I was quick to hide it under my jacket, and just like that, we had taken the man’s gun.

The number of policemen in the area was relatively high, and they could easily overshadow the four-man group that I had been dealing with. Slowly, I walked up close to the center of the gathering, just by the statue that was built in the center. Then, I removed my glasses and face cap, revealing my face to the men. Just seeing my face sent them both in motion. They rushed towards me to grab me, with one reaching for his gun.

Without any hesitation in my mind, I pulled out the gun from underneath my jacket, pulled the trigger, and shot in the air, then threw the pistol back at the owner, who was rushing towards me. The gunshot caused chaos as everyone scrambled around, running for their dear lives. Screams from everyone were inevitable, considering it was a gunshot. The crazy thing is, I only pulled the trigger once, but there were two gunshots.

The police that were around rushed to the scene, and seeing the two Mexican men with guns in their hands, they screamed for

them to drop their guns. She was joined by two other policemen, a man and a woman, who also got out their guns.

From the corner came a scream from the guy who was helping me.

“There’s a bomb!” he screamed. Just then, other policemen rushed towards him in numbers and surrounded the white van. One of the policemen opened the passenger’s side and found sitting on the man’s lap the bomb that was previously strapped to my boy.

The black car that the boss entered was about to move when a policeman stepped in front of him.

“Step out of the car with your hands in the air,” called the policeman.

The boss stepped out, and, removing his glasses, he confirmed my suspicions that he was Carlos.

“They are all Mexicans,” one of the policemen said.

“Arrest them all,” said the police officer.

Just like that, we used their gadgets against them. I took the bomb along with me, and I gave it to the guy who helped me. He then took it over to the white van, just in time to raise an alarm. Also, Hridya had placed a call as a civilian that there were terrorist activities in the area. That made the accusations easy to believe.

The crowd that had dispersed began to return, and those that had lain on the ground began to get to their feet. I was in the middle of the chaos, feeling like a real detective. Our mission was completed successfully. I had saved Maya, and all I needed to do was return home with my son. With the way things were going, Hridya had nothing against me. She must have also felt she was responsible in one way or another for my actions during that week.

Just as I took my first step toward the incoming guy who was probably approaching me to congratulate me, I slumped. What was happening was a mystery to me. I surely couldn't say what was going on, as I felt dizzy. Seeing me fall caused the guy to break into a sprint and run to me. Why he did it, I did not know.

Slowly, I began to feel a trickling sensation in the lower part of my belly. As I sat on the ground and people began to gather around me, even the police officers, I raised both my jacket and my hat, and just below my right side was a bullet hole with blood flowing out freely.

I touched the face of the wound and raised my hand to my face, and I was presented with a hand covered in blood. That was when my memory was refreshed, and I remembered how it happened. When I stood up there and removed the pistol, just as I pulled the trigger on it, pointing it into the air, the other man that was with a pistol had drawn his pistol and shot at me.

It was probably the adrenaline rush that dulled out the moment for me because there was no way I wouldn't have noticed a gunshot in my body. I was very close to passing out, and my head would have collided with the stone floor if no one behind me held me in place.

The sudden urge to close my eyes and go into a very peaceful slumber overwhelmed me, but whoever was behind me was against me with all he had. I really just wanted to rest. The scream of my name reached my ears, and I recognized the voice. I was sure I would recognize the voice, even though I was in a coma. It was that of Hridya.

Slowly, my eyes began to close as if they were magnets with opposite poles being held together. But instead of the people around me letting that happen, they kept saying, "Stay awake. Don't sleep. Stay with me."

“You’ve called the ambulance?” asked one voice, and then the other responded, “Yes, I have.”

Just then, the familiar scent of Hridya reached me, and she raised me in her hands.

“Hold on, Rahul. We did it. You did it.”

“I know,” I said in response. “What’s all the commotion about?”

“You’ve been shot,” answered Hridya slowly, with tears flowing down her cheek. Her face had grown red all of a sudden.

“I have? I have.”

I was still confused, but then it all hit me like a lightning bolt. I was shot, and that could have led to my death. That was definitely bad.

“I’ll be fine,” I said to Hridya, who seemed to be more scared than I was.

Slowly, the pain began to bite at my belly, and I grunted in pain. The blood was still trying to flow, but Hridya’s hand was firmly pressed against the opening.

In the distance came the blaring sirens of the ambulance that was called. People moved out of the way, and the professional first aiders got closer to me. The guy who had helped us all the while grabbed hold of my wife and held her in place as they treated me. I could tell she was trying her best not to scream.

The first thing the first aiders did was put pressure on the wound, and the second person gave me an injection that caused me to stay awake. I felt my blood boiling as my eyes cleared and the pain got intense. I was placed on a stretcher and carried quickly into the ambulance. Hridya had pulled herself together finally, and then she called out for the ambulance to hold on. She went into the apartment and got Maya to the ambulance. She

was quickly assisted by the people around her to get her to the ambulance. The last person that I saw join us in the ambulance was the young boy, whose name I still didn't have a clue about.

The rest of that day happened really fast, all like a dream, and I was finally put to sleep after the surgery.

My eyes opened slowly as the sun streamed into the open window and the wind blew the curtains, causing them to dance to absolutely no song. I grunted and tried to sit up properly in bed when I was held back by a hand on my chest. I tried to open my eyes to see where and who it was, but the haziness in my eyes acted as a barrier to me.

After a while, my vision cleared, and I was looking straight into the waiting and gleaming eyes of Hridya. A smile grew quicker than anything I had ever seen, and she leaned closer and planted a kiss on my forehead. She didn't say anything, and she didn't need to, as her eyes spoke volumes of what she would have said.

She got up, and another figure came into view, smaller than the first. It was Diya. Looking at my surroundings, I could tell I was in a hospital ward, but maybe it was in Rome or Dubai; I couldn't tell.

"Daddy," Diya said, with a childish smile on her face. I could tell she was extremely happy to see me.

"Hey," I said, my voice breaking.

She then leaned forward, and, just like her mother, she planted a kiss on my cheek. She then moved aside into her mother's waiting hands. From the corner of my eyes, I saw another figure I had dreaded seeing in the last few years.

Maya was standing very close by, holding onto her boy. My boy. With a smile, she placed him very close to my side, and I looked

at him with admiring eyes. He looked just like me, and as he looked at me with curious eyes, I smiled.

“What’s his name?” I managed to ask.

“Nonoblitus.”

“What does it mean?”

“Not forgotten, in Latin.”

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About the Author

Jaykay Heart (Pseudonym) is the author behind *A Butterfly Riddle*. He is the International Ambassador of Dawn Research and Development Council (DRDC, Dubai) Recognized by Govt. of India, an ISO 9001:2015 certified organization. On academic front, he is pursuing his PhD in Psychology.

What makes Jaykay Heart's works unique is the exploration of various devices such as symbolism, metaphors, and figurative language to address deeper themes specific to psychology, such as emotions and human experiences. He once quoted in an article that all his characters are grey, and not black or white.

He has won the Best Author of the Year 2022, by Salis Mania Choice Awards. Glorious India Award 2022 for Best Author in Psychological Thriller segment. His work has bestowed him the Rabindranath Tagore Literature Award by DRDC. He also had the honor of being among the top 50 impactful authors of India by CriticSpace Literary Journal. He was given the Glaze Iconic Award for the Emerging and inspiring author of 2023.

Author was featured in major news publications such as India Saga, Xpress Times, Hindustan Chronicles, New Indian Express, etc and amongst the 12 most inspiring writers of 2023 in Middy.

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